

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were Chapter 1: The Reaping, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Synopsis: A retelling of The Hunger Games with Katniss and Peeta as a couple. Written in third person so that everyone's perspective can be given.

In multiple houses across District 12 children woke up in tears, screaming for someone to hold them. A sibling may comfort them. A mother. A father. But in three homes there are no screams. Only silence and fear.

For eighteen year old Gale Hawthorne, this is his final year his name will be put into the reaping bowl, but with the amount of times his name had been entered, there is a very good chance that his last year will be the one that he's chosen to fight to the death for the Capitol's amusement.

Peeta Mellark, 16, is only entered a handful of times, but a handful is still an uncomfortable amount as far as he's concerned.

And Katniss Everdeen, 16, is entered too many times for both Gale and Peeta's liking.

Fortunately her sister Prim is only entered once. And out of thousands of names, one is a very good thing.

The reaping started over seventy years ago after the Dark Days. The thirteen districts rebelled against the Capitol and lost the war when District 13 was destroyed leaving the country of Panem with only twelve districts for the Capitol to rule over. Each one with a specific task, Twelve's being coalmining, and all of them had to follow the strict laws the Capitol set in place. The most horrific of them was the yearly reaping in which every boy and girl from the age of 12 to 18 had their names entered into a lottery of sorts. The "winners" would then represent their district in the yearly Hunger Games where they would battle to the death until only one remained.

As Gale sat in the dark bedroom he shared with his brothers, he looked out the window, waiting for the clock to say 4:00am then decided that 3:26 was close enough. He reasoned with himself, thinking, 'it's a safe enough time to head out to the woods.' With all of the security their district would be flooded with that day he was a bit more cautious about heading into the woods, but in District 12, the forbidden woods were a source of food and it was either break the law and go into the forest, or starve to death in the safety of your own

home. Since the Peacekeepers around 12 had no desire to starve either they tended to look the other way on most days, but a day like today was much riskier. It didn't matter though. Gale knew he'd brave the chance of getting caught. Being shot in the head was a hell of a lot better than being tortured in the Games, and with today being his final reaping day, he was fairly sure the odds were against him.

Though Gale knew his best friend, Katniss wouldn't be meeting him until a little later in the morning he was more than happy to take a short trip into the woods on his own. 'Maybe I can catch a squirrel and make a trade with the baker,' he thought to himself as he checked the fence for the electrical current that should have been flowing through it to keep poachers like him out. Finding it safe to enter, he stepped through, grabbed his hidden bow and arrow, and went on the hunt.

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The sound of Katniss's name being called during the reaping caused the hairs on the back of Peeta's neck to stand, putting an end to his good night's sleep. "Katnissssss Everdeeeeeeen." He shot straight up in bed, flattening the palm of his hand against his rapidly beating heart. 'No. That can't happen. They can't call her,' he silently told himself, but he knew they could and with the amount of times her name was in that reaping bowl...there was a very good chance that her name would be called. Katniss, like so many other poor families, had chosen to enter her name more than once in order to receive the tesserae.

Every child had to enter their name once on their twelfth birthday, but you also had the option to enter it for each member of your family, including yourself, in order to receive extra grain and oil. Since the entries for the reaping were cumulative, and Katniss had done this each year since the age of twelve, by Peeta's calculations her name was entered twenty times that day

It was only 4:30 in the morning, which was late by baker's standards, but on reaping day his parents allowed Peeta and his brothers to sleep in. Peeta had two older siblings. One was too old for the reaping, and the other would be going through his last later in the day. Hopefully the odds would be in his favor and he wouldn't be called.

Though there were no cakes to be made that morning, Peeta chose to wake up anyway. It was much more preferable than falling asleep and watching Katniss being ushered to her death. "Morning, Dad."

"Morning, son. Couldn't sleep?"

"Not really."

His father took out an empty cup and poured Peeta some tea without asking. "Your mother's still in bed. The dough is rising." That was all that needed to be said. His father was never much for words.

Peeta waited for his tea before getting to work in the bakery's kitchen and made certain to be as quiet as possible so as not to wake his mother. His goal was to have a somewhat peaceful morning, which was working out quite nicely, until a knock on their backdoor came. The sight of Gale Hawthorne lit Peeta's face up. 'Maybe Katniss is with him,' he hoped.

"Morning, Gale." Peeta's father spoke.

"Morning, Mr. Mellark." Gale stood a few feet away from the door.

"How are you doing today?"

"Fine sir. I uh..."

"Bring something for me?"

"Yes sir." Gale held out a squirrel by its tail.

"Well that's a fine one. Hold on a second." Peeta's father turned to him and said, "Peeta, grab me one of those fresh loaves there, will you?" Peeta raced to the baking rack that held the fresh buns and handed his father a steaming loaf then stood to the side to watch them finish their trade. "Here you go." They made the swap. "Good luck today, Gale."

"Thank you."

Peeta kept looking out the door to see if Katniss was with him, but he couldn't tell.

"She wasn't there," Peeta's father said as he closed the door.

"What?"

Peeta's father turned to him and said, "Katniss. She wasn't with him."

The heat of Peeta's blush crept up his cheeks. "Oh."

His father decided to give him a break and switched topics. "You're still going to make those deliveries for me later?"

Peeta's eyes lit up as he said, "Absolutely!" Peeta's dad had asked him to bring the Peacekeepers some bread later in the day. Normally he'd do it himself, but for some reason, Peeta got to do it that day. It was an excuse to escape the bakery and he didn't question it.

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Katniss didn't hear her sister Prim wake up and crawl into bed with her mother, but she felt the emptiness shortly after her sister left her side. She felt the cool mattress and got up to check on her. Seeing her mother and sister curled together in sleep, provided her with a false sense of security. Even though it was only for a second, she reveled in it. She had to for Prim's sake. She tried not to concentrate on the fact that it was Prim's first reaping that day. The thought of it made her stomach churn. 'The first of many,' Katniss thought as she turned away from the innocent scene in front of her and went to her room to change into her hunting clothes. 'I've got to get out of here,' she thought to herself. Making an escape, though brief as it would be, was a necessity that morning. There were too many people to worry about and nothing she could do to help them.

Katniss walked along the fence that kept District 12 separated from the woods. It was supposed to be electrified twenty four hours a day, but they barely had electricity in their district. So if the fence was on a few hours a day that was a lot. Just in case, she held out her hand and listened for the familiar hum that signaled its power. It was off. She entered in a gap at the base of the fence, hidden by years of overgrown brush, closest to her house. Once inside she looked for her best friend, Gale.

They had gotten to know each other over the worst of circumstances. Death. Both of their fathers had died in the same mine explosion five years earlier. Gale had to provide for his family of five and Katniss for her family of three. Too much responsibility for such young children, but so was fighting to the death in the Hunger Games. They met in the woods on accident. Katniss taught Gale how to use a bow and arrows. Gale taught her how to set snares. They showed one another their secret spots. Where to find berries. Where the lake was. How to fish. And eventually became close friends.

Gale, a boy from the Seam, looked a lot like Katniss. They both had dark hair, olive skin, gray eyes. The difference was where Katniss was petite; Gale was built like an ox; standing over six feet tall and quite muscular. Katniss on the other hand was on the small side. Though she was strong from all of her hours spent hunting in the woods, she was still malnourished which gave her a slim frame.

The morning was bright and sunny, but the significance of the day left a somber cloud of despair hanging over them. They spent a few hours gathering berries, fishing, and of course eating.

"The baker gave me something today." Gale pulled out the fresh loaf of bread.

At the sound of the word baker, Katniss' stomach fluttered. She wondered if Gale had seen Peeta. "Oh my God!" 'He had to have seen Peeta if he got that,' she thought to herself as she eyed up the fresh loaf of bread.

Gale ripped it in half and said, "Can you believe he gave this to me for a squirrel? I think he was feeling a bit sentimental today."

"Aren't we all?" The tone in her voice was disappointment.

"Happy Hunger Games!" Gale called out in a false Capitol accent.

Katniss matched the accent and followed up with, "And may the odds be ever in your favor." Gale tossed a blackberry into the air, which Katniss caught in her mouth and they chuckled together. What choice did they have? To sit and dwell on the day would do no one any good. They sat and talked for a bit. When Gale had mentioned running away together, Katniss laughed and pushed the thought out of his mind. Prim in the woods was a joke.

When they were finished Gale said, "Should we head to the Hob first?"

"Actually. Can I meet you there?"

"Meet me there?" Gale had a quizzical look on his face. "Why would you meet me there? We can just go together."

"I just need a few minutes alone, Gale," it was the only thing she could think of as an excuse.

"Oh. Okay, Catnip. I guess. Want me to wait outside the fence for you?"

"NO! No...just go ahead without me. Maybe you could...you can just go to the hob without me. Or Just start walking there and I'll meet you. I just want some time to myself, Gale. Geez!" She knew she was acting defensive, but if Gale knew why she wanted to be alone, he'd start lecturing her and she wasn't in the mood for confrontation.

"Fine!" As Gale left, she could hear him muttering something about women. Then she heard them talking.

"Hey, Peeta."

"Hey, Gale. How's it going?"

"Pretty good. Considering."

"Yeah. Hey...I wanted to tell you earlier...good luck today." Peeta sounded quite genuine to Katniss.

"Thanks, Peeta. I appreciate that. Good luck to you too."

"See ya later."

"Yeah. Later."

Katniss listened as the pair went their separate ways. She stood silently against the tree. Holding her breath. Then suddenly she heard a rustling of branches. Someone was sliding underneath the fence. Was it Gale? Her heart began to pound in her chest. 'Please don't let it be a Peacekeeper. Not today of all days.' She closed her eyes and waited for the white uniformed guard to take her into custody, thinking it had to be one of Snow's men ready to bring her to justice. They'd probably rig it so her name was called out at the reaping and she'd have no choice but to go into the arena after all. When she felt the hand come down on her arm she knew her time was up. She was caught.

"Katniss?"

"Peeta!" Her eyes flew open and her arms wrapped around his neck.

"You okay?" He could feel her heart pounding a mile a minute.

"I thought you were a Peacekeeper."

"Why would you think that?"

"Because...you never come into the woods."

"Didn't we plan this? Didn't you ask me to meet you here?"

"Yes, but I didn't think you were going to actually do it."

He rolled his eyes and said, "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Oh that's not what I meant. I just didn't think you'd be able to get out."

"Well I did."

"So I heard. It was nice of you to wish Gale luck."

"I'm kind of worried about him."

This took Katniss by surprise. The entire time she and Peeta had been seeing one another, he had been jealous of Gale. For him to be worried about her friend was a shocking twist. "You're worried about him? Normally you're just jealous of him."

"Yeah...well. Not today." He thought for a second and then asked. "How many times is his name in there today?"

"Forty two."

"Geez."

"I know. I'm sick just thinking about it."

"Guess the odds aren't exactly in his favor."

"Are they in anyone's favor?" She asked with disgust.

"Not really."

"I hate this."

"Me too." Peeta pulled her into his arms and let out a sigh when she squeezed him tightly.

"Let's just run away, Katniss. Let's disappear into the woods so no one will find us."

Katniss laughed softly. "That's the second time today someone made that offer to me."

Peeta pulled his head back and gave her a discerning look. "Who made the first offer?" Like he needed to ask.

"Gale."

"I'm starting to feel that whole jealousy thing again," he said with a suspicious tone in his voice.

"Oh, Peeta. Stop it. There's nothing to be jealous about. Gale's just a friend."

"In your mind maybe, but not in his."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Katniss, a man doesn't ask you to run away with him because he wants to spend his life being friends with you."

"Peeta, you're being ridiculous. Gale was just... he's just...scared. It's reaping day." She began picking at a stick she found on the ground.
"We're all scared."

"I guess."

"Aren't you frightened?"

He took her hand and said, "I'm petrified for you. I'm so scared they're going to call your name. I even had a nightmare about it."

She dropped the stick and threw her arms around his neck. "Oh Peeta. What if they call you? What if it's you?"

"My name is barely in there."

"But still..."

"I know."

They held onto each other for a minute...two...

"I have to go. Gale's going to wonder what's taking me so long."

"So let him wait." Peeta spoke into her neck. "We don't get much time together."

Since she wasn't quite ready to leave the security of his arms, she quickly agreed, "Okay. Just a couple more minutes. Then I have to go."

"How's Prim doing today?" He asked.

"She had a nightmare last night. I found her asleep with my mother this morning."

"Poor thing. She must be petrified."

"I wish she didn't have to go through this."

"I wish none of us ever had to go through this," Peeta added.

The idea of sending children off to the slaughter had Katniss vowing aloud, "I'm never having kids."

"Me neither." They smiled sadly into each other's eyes.

"That's good to know," Katniss felt a bit of relief. "I was afraid you'd want some."

"No way. I'd never put a child through this." He turned them around and rested his back against the tree then pulled her into his embrace. "If we lived in another world. In a world where there were no Games,

then maybe... yeah... I'd have kids. But until that day... I could never have a child. It would be cruel."

They stood in silence. Holding one another.

Though he hated to admit it, Peeta finally said, "You should go, Katniss. It's getting late."

"Yeah." She didn't want to leave the security of his arms, but he was right. "I'll see you later." They pulled apart. As they walked their separate ways she felt a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Like this would be the last time they would see each other. "Peeta!" She ran to him and crushed her lips against his. They had never kissed before. Not like this. Though they had come close many times their lips never actually puckered and pressed. He had brushed his lips across hers a few times, kissed each other's cheeks...hands...heads...neck, pretty much anywhere they considered safe, but never flush on the lips before.

Their mouths were closed. Her breath was held. When she felt the tip of his tongue flick against her bottom lip she took in a burst of air. Her lips parted and her tongue mimicked his. Like this? It asked. Yes, like this, his answered. Their mouths opened and their tongues softly explored the other's mouth in a slow and curious dance. Their heads moved back and forth. Their hands roaming, memorizing each curve of the other's back...waist...hips... when they pulled apart, their lips were moist and swollen and his forehead rested upon hers.

"I'll see you after the reaping," Peeta said. "No matter what." If her name was called or not, he would be with her. He had made the decision after he had the nightmare and he wasn't going to let her talk him out of it.

"I'll see you after the reaping." She shimmied out from under the fence and he squeezed out through a hole further up along the fence line so no one would see them exiting together.

When she got to the Hob Gale was waiting for her.

The Hob was a black market of sorts. When her father was still alive he had taken her there. He had traded game for things like thread, candles, material...anything that they needed to survive. Now that he was gone it was up to Katniss to do the trading. She and Gale usually did this together. They brought this morning's loot to the different booths and got what they needed for both of their families, keeping what they needed for themselves. Greasy Sae, a woman that was known for her outrageous cooking, had given them a bowl of stew. She said it was beef stew, with a wink. Most likely it was wild dog, but Peacekeepers will eat anything when they're hungry and as long as you tell them it's beef they don't question it.

They went to the Mayor's house and knocked on the backdoor. They knew from experience to always go to the backdoor. The Mayor had a fondness for strawberries so they sold him a bushel full. When his daughter Madge came to the door she was dressed in a pretty white dress with her hair curled and arranged in a delicate style. She too was dressed for the reaping. No one was exempt. Granted Madge didn't need to put in for tesserae like Gale and Katniss, but that wasn't her fault. She had as good of a chance at being called as the rest of them did. Gale was a bit snippy with Madge, he was resentful towards her because her name was only entered five times as opposed to his forty two, but she couldn't help that and Katniss didn't hold it against her. Maybe she would have had Madge not been a sort of...friend to Katniss. Since they were both loners they seemed to seek each other out for school activities. Neither one demanded conversation from the other and the arrangement suited both girls quite well.

As Katniss and Gale went home it was difficult not discussing the impending doom drawing near, but neither one of them wanted to dwell upon the inevitable. All they could do was expect the worst and hope for the best.

"Well, I'll see you soon," Gale waved as he headed towards home.

Katniss walked into her house and saw the fair-haired Prim standing in front of her mother. Her big eyes filled with panic and fear so it was of the utmost importance that Katniss didn't show the same to Prim.

"Don't you look beautiful?" Katniss said as she walked over to her sister and engulfed her in a comforting embrace. "Let me see," Katniss held her at arm's length and watched as Prim did a slow spin in front of her. The hem of Prim's shirt stuck out of her skirt which Katniss fixed, "Tuck in that tail little duck." The sound of Prim's soft giggle brought a hint of a smile to Katniss's lips.

"I laid something out for you too," Katniss's mother spoke quietly from a few feet away.

"Okay." Katniss' words were cool, but she tried to be kind to her mother today. It was going to be hard on her mom for the next few hours. She tried not to be resentful towards her mother, but it was tough. Prim had forgiven her mom for the things she had done...or not done in the past, but Katniss had a difficult time overlooking how neglectful her mother had been.

After Katniss' father had died in the mines, her mother checked out. She went to bed and stayed there. The district had given them a month's worth of salary, thinking that would be enough time for Katniss's mom to get a job, but she didn't. She had spent that time staring into space. Sitting in a chair or huddling under the covers, not saying a word, letting her children practically starve to death. If it hadn't been for the kindness of strangers. One stranger actually and

the sheer determination to survive engrained within Katniss, she and Prim would've been taken from their home or worse yet, they would've actually starved to death. So yes, Katniss was very apprehensive when it came to forgiving her mother, but today of all days she tried very hard to be kind.

Katniss, bathed, got dressed and sat as her mother weaved her hair into an intricate braid on the top of her head. As she stood in front of the mirror, Prim stared at her and told her that she was beautiful. When they heard the steam whistle blow, they knew it was time for them to gather in town.

As they walked to the square they saw parents hugging their children with tears in their eyes. Katniss held onto Prim's hand, trying her hardest to protect her from the grim images. "Just look straight ahead, Prim. Don't worry. You'll be fine." She tried to keep her voice bright. "You're going to be fine. You'll see. Then later on we'll feast on fish stew and strawberries."

The lines of children in front of them made Katniss think of cattle being herded for the slaughter, but Prim's question quickly pulled her from her murky thoughts. "What's that?"

"They're just going to prick your finger," Katniss answered. "You need to go stand over there with the little kids. I'm going to be right there. You just watch me, okay?" Katniss gave Prim a little nudge. "Go ahead. It'll be over in no time at all and then we'll be home eating strawberries." She hoped the idea of food would help ease some of Prim's fears, but knew that nothing ever could. Katniss watched as Prim was swallowed into the group of children. The moment she disappeared Katniss's mind went to straight to Gale and Peeta.

She started wishing for their safety. 'Please don't let them be called. Gale's in there forty two times. Peeta's only in there five times. But still

that's five times. But Gale's in there forty two times. Forty two times! Oh God!' Morose thoughts continued to fly through her mind as she took her spot in the midst of the 16 year olds.

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From the moment Peeta entered the square he scanned the crowd for Katniss, but failed to see her. The entire day he worried about her. Something in his gut kept saying the odds were not in her favor. He just knew she was going to be called. She was going to be in the Games. All he could do was hope that he was wrong. If she was called he was prepared to volunteer and go in too. He had to make sure that she came home. He didn't tell his family this, though somehow, he knew that his father would suspect it. As he was silently wishing she wouldn't get called he noticed Gale sticking out of the crowd like a sore thumb. Following Gale's line of sight, Peeta blew out a cleansing breath when he saw that Gale was looking at Katniss. 'There you are,' he thought. 'I've been worried sick about you.' He noticed the concern written on her face and knew she was worried about Gale. Heck, Peeta was worried about Gale too, but Katniss and Peeta would take care of Gale's family if he went into the Games. They had made that promise to each other a couple of months ago without Gale's knowledge. Just then Katniss's eyes locked onto Peeta's and her entire face transformed. There was a gentle gleam in her eyes and a tender smile lifting at her lips. Peeta mouthed the word, "Hi," wishing he could make his way across the crowd and stand with her.

"Hi," she mouthed back.

With the...festivities about to begin, neither one of them noticed Gale's curious gaze or the questions written on his face.

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Every eye in District Twelve, as well as the Capitol, was on the Justice Building. In front of it stood a stage with a podium, a giant glass bowl on each end of the stage and chairs which sat the Mayor, the only living victor, Haymitch Abernathy and he seemed to be missing in action, and Effie Trinket the Capitol assigned escort of District 12.

Effie Trinket was an odd looking woman with a stranger sounding voice. Wearing an off colored pink wig, outrageously high heeled shoes and clothing is so tight a person's mind must wonder how she breathes. 'Perhaps that's why her voice was so peculiar,' thought Katniss, but her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Mayor Undersee's voice as he begins to read.

The Dark Days. Every Year the same story was told.

Blah...Blah...Blah...droughts...blah...blah...disaster...storms...uprising...Capitol... Then the districts rebelled. They lost. As punishment every year each district must send one girl and one boy to fight to the death, until only one is left. They're known as tributes. The arenas can be anything from a desert to icy tundra. Anything really. It usually last for a couple of weeks and once in the arena, there are no rules. These are known as the Hunger Games. If you are the winner of the Hunger Game then you will live a life of luxury. Riches, food, oil, clothing. You want for nothing for the remainder of your life. And your district receives extra food, grain and oil for the next year as well.

When Mayor Undersee finishes with the reading of the History of Panem Katniss can hear the shuffling of feet amongst all of the children. Thousands of them are roped off and praying that their name is not going to be called, including Katniss. Twelve and thirteen year old girls are in one section. Twelve and thirteen year old boys, in another. And so on and so on. On the edge of the square are those Katniss considered the scum of the earth. The people who will bet on whose name will be called into the arena. Who will survive the Games? The scourge of District 12. In the back of the square were the parents. The ones that were wishing someone else's children would be called and not their own.

On the stage sits two giant glass bowls filled with slips of paper. Inside one bowl are the names of girls. Thousands of names. Twenty of which say Katniss Everdeen. On the other side of the stage is an identical bowl. Forty two of the names say Gale Hawthorne. Five say Peeta Mellark.

If Mayor Undersee's monotone introduction doesn't get people's attention when he announces District 12's previous winners, Haymitch Abernathy's, who is inebriated as he stumbles across the stage and lands on Effie Trinket, will. Katniss held back her smile as Haymitch attempted to hug Effie, causing her wig to go askew. Though Effie tried to straighten it out, it was useless. It took a few minutes, but Mayor Undersee was finally able to get Haymitch in a chair. Though Effie's wig seemed to be a lost cause.

With the excitement over, Effie's heels began to click as she made her way across the stage and stands before the microphone saying in her odd Capitol accent, "Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds be ever in your favor!" Prior to making her way to one of the glass balls she said, as she did every year, "Ladies first!" Her fingers begin to do

an odd little dance as she chose a white slip of paper with someone's name printed on it.

Katniss held her breath, hoping it wasn't her.

Peeta silently wished for someone other than Katniss to be called.

Gale's hands turn into fists as he hung his head down waiting for an innocent girl to be thrown to the wolves, and hoped it wasn't Katniss.

A gush seemed to empty Katniss's lungs. Effie Trinket didn't call out her name.

Effie called out, "Primrose Everdeen!"

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were Chapter 2: Peeta Mellark, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Two: Peeta Mellark

In this chapter you will find out how Katniss and Peeta came to be a couple prior to the Games. Once again, there are things from the book and the movie in this story, but sometimes they are out of order. Since it's my story, things might seem a little out of place, but it's a story so... All POV's are represented here.

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

The calling of Prim's name hadn't quite registered with Katniss as she stood in the square frozen in place. Though there was some shuffling and a low murmur amongst the adults standing at the far end of the square, Katniss heard none of it. She did not know that at that very moment Gale's fists clenched while he silently cursed the people in the Capitol, or that Peeta instantly knew he'd be going into the Games.

Katniss couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. The feeling of someone's hand on her shoulder had her eyes darting around the group of children in front of her. 'Prim,' she thought to herself. 'It was one name out of thousands. How could her name be chosen?' Katniss name was in there so many more times than Prim's. When she saw Prim's back, and her tiny hand tucking the little duck tail back into her shirt, it snapped Katniss out of her stupor. "Prim!" The tremble in Katniss's voice seemed to echo through the square. The crowd of children parted allowing Katniss her freedom; enabling her to stop her sister before she got any closer to the stage. "PRIM!" She rushed to her sister's side, careful to keep the hysteria she was feeling from her voice. Pulling Prim behind her, Katniss sheltered her sister behind her

own body. "I volunteer." She called out. "I volunteer as tribute!" A deafening hush fell over the crowd as Katniss sacrificed herself for her sister's safety.

The sound of Prim's frantic screams, "No! No, Katniss no!" could not deter Katniss.

Though she longed to hold her sister close and tell her she would be okay, Katniss couldn't afford to do so. Showing any sign of weakness from this point on would make her an easy target to the other tributes that would be watching the recaps later on in the day. "Go to mom, Prim. Go find mom." Katniss needed to stay calm. The Games had begun. All cameras were now focused on her and Prim. So Prim had to go. "Prim, let go!" Pulling herself from her sister's grasp was one of the hardest things Katniss had ever done. "Let go!" Fortunately Gale stepped up and grabbed Prim.

"Come on." He picked up Prim and said, "Up you go, Catnip."

Katniss stared at the stairs leading to the stage. There were only a few steps, but they seemed to be never ending. Effie Trinket stood at the top of them with her hand held out waiting with a smile that said, Katniss had just been bestowed the honor of becoming a tribute. "Well, bravo! That's the spirit of the Games! What's your name?"

"Katniss Everdeen." Katniss swallowed the bile that was rising to the top of her throat.

"I bet my buttons that was your sister. Don't want her to steal all your glory, do we? Come on, everybody! Let's give a big round of applause to our newest tribute!"

To Katniss's surprise everyone from District 12 was silent. First one person took their three middle fingers and pressed them to their lips

then held it out, and then another until the entire crowd held their fingers up to her. It was a symbol from the district. A sign of respect. Of love. It meant goodbye to someone you love. The urge to cry at her district's only form of dissent towards the Games had to be quelled regardless of how touched Katniss was.

Haymitch stood up and declared to the crowd, "Look at this one. Look at her, I like her! Lots of...spunk! More than you!" With his arm temporarily around Katniss's shoulder Haymitch continued yelling, "More than you!" He pointed directly into the camera at the front of the stage and was about to say more, but his drunken state caused him to fall off the edge of the stage and topple into the audience. Within minutes Haymitch was taken away on a stretcher and Katniss's welcomed interlude during her tortuous affair was over.

Looking into the crowd she noticed Gale returning to the group of boys he was standing with and took notice of Peeta's fearful expression. In an instant she could hear his words earlier in the morning, *"I'll see you after the reaping, no matter what,"* and feared that his prediction would come true.

The terror coursing through Katniss at this point is not because she may die, but because her sister may regardless of Katniss volunteering for her. If Peeta or Gale are called they'd never be able to keep her family fed. The idea that either one of them would join her in the arena was unfathomable. There was no way on earth her luck would be that bad, and the idea that either one of them would volunteer was ridiculous. They'd never do that to her. 'They have to stay here to keep my family alive,' she thought to herself.

Effie's announcement that it was time for the boys to be called didn't register until she heard her shrill of a voice say, "Peeta Mellark."

'No!' Katniss held back her scream. 'This can't be happening,' she thought to herself, but it was happening. Peeta was going into the arena with her. This is why she didn't want to let him into her life. This is why she didn't want to let *anyone* into her life. Because losing them would be worse than actual dying.

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Peeta listened to the sound of his name being called. He knew he'd be going into the arena the moment Prim's name was read, but hearing his own name was somewhat of a shock to his system. The second his name was called out, the group of boys surrounding him, scattered as though he had a contagious disease they may contract. Peeta felt the tears forming in the back of his eyes. 'I'm going to die,' was his first thought. 'I'm actually going to die. I thought I'd be braver than this, but I'm not. I'm not brave at all. I'm petrified. I wanted to be strong for her, but I'm scared. I'm sixteen years old and this is the end of my life. Geez. There's so much I wanted to do.' With each step he took he felt the end coming near. When he saw the look on Katniss's face it got worse. 'I'm sorry Katniss,' was his second thought. 'I'm so sorry. I didn't want you to have to go through this.' His insides refused to stop trembling. 'How can this be happening,' he thought to himself. 'Prim had one entry. I had five. There are thousands of names in those bowls. What are the odds?' Apparently not in either of their favor.

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Gale looked on and watched as Peeta and Katniss took their positions as the tributes of District 12. He was sick to his stomach. It was just a few hours ago that he and Katniss were in the woods eating bread and blackberries. That Peeta was wishing him good luck. Wishing *him* good luck. And in the back of his mind Gale had been thinking, 'Yeah, I'm going to need it. You don't need it baker boy.' A sense of guilt momentarily rushed through Gale. Peeta was always kind to him. He was always nice to Katniss and Prim too. Katniss always had nice things to say about him, especially lately. She seemed to talk about him a lot lately. Gale watched as they shook hands and noticed the tortured expression in their eyes as they locked hands. 'I'd be in pain too,' he thought.

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Katniss felt the reassuring squeeze of Peeta's handshake wishing she could pull him into a hug and tell him that everything would be alright. But it wouldn't be. Only one would make it out alive. Chances were it would be neither of them.

She felt the warmth of his hand and thought about the first time she held it. They were in the elevator in the mines. Every year they were

required to go to the mines for school. She didn't mind it before her father had died, but after the explosion in which he was killed, it was suffocating. A few months ago they had gone there for school and when they were on the way back up there was no room on the elevator for everyone so she and Peeta had to wait for it to come back down. When it came back for them they were the only two left, but on the way up it had stalled. Katniss began to panic...

"Help! Help!" Katniss started pulling the emergency lever while screaming at the top of her lungs. "Somebody needs to do something! Get us out of here!"

"Calm down, Katniss," Peeta's gentle tone did nothing to calm her frayed nerves. "They know we're in here. They're not going to go home or anything."

"What if it explodes or something?" She began pacing back and forth. "I have to get out of here. Give me a boost."

"What?" Peeta started laughing. "Are you going to climb up a hundred stories?"

"If I have to."

"You're being ridiculous." Standing behind her, he placed his hands on her shoulders. "Just take a few deep breaths and sit down. They'll get us out of here eventually."

"Eventually?" She turned on him and said, "No! Now! They need to get us out of here now! This thing could explode!"

"Katniss, nothing bad is going to happen. We're not going to explode."

"How do you know?" She started to envision her father's death. She could see him being blown to bits in front of her eyes and felt her insides crumbling. "Peeta I have to get out of here. I can't die in here like my father."

"Hey," he rubbed a comforting hand across her back to which she took no notice. "We're not going to die. We're just stuck in an elevator. That's all. It's just an elevator."

"In the mines." Her voice turned into a whimper and she hated herself for allowing her vulnerability to show.

"Nope. We're not in the mines. We're in a mansion in the Capitol." He wanted to try and get her mind off of the situation.

"What?" She turned to him with a quizzical look on her face.

"Sure. Can't you see the buildings? Look there?" Peeta turned her to face a wall and said, "There's a view of a waterfall leading into river." He turned her around and pointed to another wall saying, "And over there is the tallest building ever built. I'm not sure why the top of it is fuchsia, but it's pretty. And over there is the President's mansion." He faced her to the back of the elevator. "And right there is the whole city." He turned her around to face the last wall. "It's got a great view, doesn't it?" His voice was gentle and soothing. "All you have to do is look. Just look at it, Katniss. Can you see it?" He turned her again and stared into her eyes. "If you try hard enough you can see anything you like. What do you want to see, Katniss?" His hands were on her shoulders. He lowered his voice to barely above a whisper and he said, "Close your eyes." Why she did she had no idea, all Katniss could think was that imagining someplace else was better than her actual reality. "Now tell me what you want to see. What makes you happy, Katniss?"

She thought for a minute then said, "The woods."

"Okay, picture the woods. See the trees. Can you see the birds? The forest green leaves? Listen to the sound of the wind blowing through the branches. There are crickets chirping in the distance. Smell the pine. Now open your eyes, Katniss." When she opened them he said, "Tell me about the woods. Tell me what you see." He turned her to face a wall and said, "What's over there?"

The first thing she thought of was, "The strawberry patch."

"Tell me about the strawberry patch."

The sound of Peeta's calming voice was able to place her in the middle of the woods she loved so much. In front of her she could see the patch of berries, but since Peeta couldn't Katniss decided to tell him about it. "Gale and I go there to pick them. All the birds used to eat them until Gale suggested that we put some wire over them to keep them out. Now we have a ton of berries."

"I love strawberries," Peeta's breath tickled at her neck while he spoke.

"They're so sweet," Katniss added. "And when you bite into them they burst in your mouth. My mother makes jam out of them." She could almost taste the berries. "It's about the only thing that improves that horrible bread we eat. If you like, I'll bring some strawberries to school for you." She wasn't sure why she made the offer; to say thank you for calming her down, maybe?

"I'd like that, Katniss."

He turned her towards another wall, pointed at it and asked, "What's over there?"

Had she actually been in the woods she would be facing, "The lake." The feeling of cool water lapping at her skin as she floated in the small body of water brought a hint of a smile to Katniss's lips.

"There's a lake?" Peeta asked with excitement in his voice.

The fact that she had never told any living soul, not even Gale, about the lake didn't even register with her. "Yes. That's where I learned how to swim." She pictured herself as a child splashing around in the water; rooting around for katniss with her toes.

He leaned his head closer to her shoulder and said, "I didn't know you could swim."

"Yes, my father taught me how." She closed her eyes as she pictured the happy images in her head. "Would you like to learn?" The offer seemed to come out before Katniss could think better of it.

"Yes," Peeta answered with a shy grin, "but I'm afraid I wouldn't have time to go to the woods with you."

She turned to look at him and wished that he could escape into the forest with her for a little while. She had known of Peeta Mellark for years, but prior to that day Katniss had never spoken directly to him. Their eyes met across the hall in school on more than one occasion, but Peeta's always flitted away as though he were afraid he'd be caught looking at her. Now that they were actually having a conversation, Katniss found that she actually welcomed the idea of talking to Peeta outside of the elevator they were trapped inside of. "Couldn't you find time, Peeta? Sneak away some afternoon?"

"If I could sneak away, would you teach me to swim?" Peeta asked with a gleam in his eye.

"Yes," It wasn't an answer she would normally give, but today it was simple to say.

"Tell me more about the lake."

"If you root around in it, you'll find katniss. That's what I was named for. My father used to tell me that I'd never starve if I found myself." She smiled to herself. "I fish there."

"I like fish."

"I'd bring you some, but it would probably go bad by the time I brought it to you."

"I wouldn't want rotten fish." His nose crinkled up.

"Want to know about the trees I climb?" Katniss thought of the squirrels she saw when she scampered up the trees.

"Sure," the smile on Peeta's face told her he was actually enjoying their little reprieve from the mines of District Twelve.

"They're over there," she turned to another wall and pointed. "I can climb pretty high up," she said over her shoulder with a touch of pride in her voice.

"I'm not much of a climber."

"That's okay. I can teach you."

"Wow," Peeta crossed his arms and smiled from ear to ear. "I'm learning how to swim. To climb trees. Anything else you're teaching me?"

With an arch of her brow Katniss thought of the one impressive thing she could do. "I can teach you how to shoot a bow and arrow if you like." Their voices were low; almost intimate. Considering they were a hundred stories beneath the ground Katniss was feeling exceptionally relaxed and comfortable in Peeta's company.

"Actually," Peeta ducked his head slightly down and locked eyes with her, "I would like to learn how to do that."

"Then it's a date." She hadn't meant to say that.

*"I'd like **that** too." He was hoping she meant it.*

She felt the blood rush to her face as she walked away from him. All signs of their intimate conversation were gone and Katniss spoke with caution, "Peeta..."

"Katniss..." He said mimicking her tone.

The woods they were just in the middle of had vanished and now the elevator walls were closing in on her. "What's taking them so long?"

"Don't avoid the topic, Katniss."

"I'm not avoiding anything," she said defensively.

"Yes you are," Peeta said it as though he had intimate knowledge of her way of thinking.

"No I'm not. You want to learn how to shoot a bow and arrow and I agreed to show you how. Case closed."

"Whatever, Katniss." He sat in the corner of the elevator and picked up a tiny piece of coal. Obviously direct confrontation wasn't going to

work with her, and Peeta needed to decide how to handle the situation.

They were silent for several minutes until she said, "Congratulations on coming in second in the wrestling tournament. I thought you were going to win it for certain."

"Thanks."

Another few minutes of quiet went by and then she said, "Your father seems to like squirrel a lot. I sell them to him all the time."

"Yup." Another piece of tiny coal was flicked across the elevator.

"Oh come on, Peeta. Are you seriously not going to talk to me?" Normally she'd be fine with that, but today it was getting under her skin.

"Nope," Peeta answered with a bit of a pout.

"Why not?"

"Because there's nothing to talk about."

"Fine." 'Two could play this game,' she thought. 'If he wants to sit and sulk then he could sit and sulk.'

After ten minutes of deep thought, though Katniss was certain he was brooding, Peeta finally spoke up, "Do you know how long I've had a crush on you?"

She would rather he went back to moping. There was no way she could answer his question. One: because she didn't know the answer. And two: because she didn't want to know the answer.

"Katniss? Answer me," Peeta insisted.

"No." It was time for Katniss to brood.

"Fine then I'll answer it for you. Since the first day of school." He took a deep breath and said, "On the first day of school my dad pointed you out." He told her how his father wanted to marry his mother, but she had fallen in love with Katniss's father instead. He told her that he listened to Katniss sing the Valley Song and that the moment she sang the birds fell silent and Peeta had fallen head over heels for her.

Unsure of what to do, Katniss had never heard anyone speak about her that way before; she tried to ignore the fluttering in her stomach, the tingles that crept across her flesh and the sweaty palms that refused to dry. The look on Peeta's face when he spoke about her was nothing short of pure rapture and it frightened the hell out of Katniss. She wanted to run away, but where could she go? She was stuck in this shaft. She looked at Peeta, willing herself to say something...anything, but the only thing that came out was useless, "Peeta. I don't know what to say to that."

"You don't have to say anything, Katniss," Peeta hoped she would have responded differently, but simply the fact that he had finally conquered his fear of talking to her seemed to satisfy him for the moment though that satisfaction wouldn't last long. "I just wanted you to know."

'Well now what?' She thought to herself. 'It's not like there can be anything between the two of us.'

Peeta interrupted her thoughts and asked her, "So what do you say? Want to go out with me sometime?"

Her head shot up. "Stop it, Peeta."

"Stop what? Feeling this way? I can't. Trust me. I've tried."

"Well, try harder."

"I don't want to try harder." Peeta made an instant decision. Now that his feelings were out in the open, he was going to go for it with Katniss and somehow convince her she should date him. "Why don't you try harder?"

"Try what?"

"Try...liking me." He grinned.

"Hah." She let out a burst of crazed laughter. "That's not going to happen."

"Why not?" He asked as though he were completely dumbfounded by her response.

"Because," seemed like a good enough excuse to Katniss.

"Of Gale?" Peeta had been jealous of the guy for years. He didn't know if they had a relationship outside of friendship, but Peeta was certainly curious about the nature of it.

"Gale? What does he have to do with this?" Gale was the furthest thing from her mind right then. It was too full of Peeta Mellark who was apparently losing his mind from being trapped in the elevator.

"Well he's your boyfriend isn't he?"

"No! Oh my God. Is that what you think?" Katniss stood up and began pacing around the compact space. "I don't have a boyfriend and I don't want one." She wasn't angry, but she was firm in her thinking.

She couldn't afford to have feelings like this. It just led to complications.

Peeta felt relief. "So there's nothing...romantic between the two of you?"

"Are you listening to me? I don't want anything...romantic with anyone...ever."

"But you don't have any feelings like that for him?" Peeta started to have hope.

"No. He's just a friend." Katniss had no clue why she was answering these questions other than maybe she was going insane like Peeta.

"That's good news."

"Peeta, you don't seem to get what I'm saying."

"No. I get it. You're saying that Gale is just a friend and that I have a chance." He grinned at her.

She couldn't help but laugh at him. "No. No one has a chance."

He stood up and started walking towards her. "Aw come on, Katniss. You know you like me."

"No I don't." She walked to a different corner.

"Sure you do." He moved in closer to her. "I'm charming." He gave her a smile to match.

"You're annoying." Her resolve was slowly melting and it frightened her.

"I'm funny."

"Cocky is more like it." She raised her brow in accusation.

"Sure of myself," he corrected.

"Amusing, I suppose." She chuckled when he wagged his brows at her.

"I'm not bad looking," he was standing in front of her.

"You're okay, I guess."

"You obviously have some interest in me."

She was slightly taken aback. "Why would you think that?"

"You knew I came in second place in the wrestling tournament."

"The entire school knows that."

"No they don't." He stepped closer to her. "Admit it. You like me."

"Well, I don't hate you." She smiled at him as though the lack of contempt she had for him was the best he'd ever get.

"That's a start." He slid down the wall of the elevator, about two feet away from her, and said, "Guess I can't ask for much more."

She sat down next to him and breathed a sigh of relief that the conversation was over. Or so she thought.

"If I could I'd take you away from here," that dreamlike quality was back in Peeta's voice, "I'd take you someplace safe. Away from all of this so you'd never have to have your name be put into a reaping ball

and you'd always have food on the table. Can you imagine a place like that, Katniss?"

"There is no place like that, Peeta."

"Just pretend for a minute. Pretend that it exists." He turned his head and looked at her over his shoulder. With a trancelike tone, he began speaking about a fantastical world that would never exist. "Imagine a place where you could just walk into the woods without worrying that the fence would be electrified. Where hunting wasn't against the law and feeding your family was a right not a privilege." He watched as she closed her eyes and a small smile crept up on her face. "A place where anyone could be what they wanted. A place where kids could spend the days leading up to their twelfth birthday filled with excitement and anticipation instead of dread." The idea of it made Peeta's heart ache. "That's the kind of world I'd give you, Katniss." He reached out and took her hand in his. To both of their surprise she didn't pull away. Instead she threaded her fingers through his.

"Peeta," she took a brief second; staring at their joined hands, "I really don't want to get involved with anyone this way. I'm not interested in having a boyfriend."

"What about a friend? Can we be friends?"

"I suppose." She wasn't sure how it would be possible, but she hadn't been opposed to the idea when it flashed through her mind.

"Close friends?"

"Yes," she answered with a blush that seemed to send heat radiating off of her cheeks. She thought of Gale and the relationship she had developed with him over the years, and then compared what she had with him to the little time she had spent with Peeta and one thing

stood out like a sore thumb. "I don't normally hold my friend's hands though."

"Then maybe we should classify this as a special friendship."

"Peeta..."

"Katniss...I like you. A lot., but if you can honestly sit there and tell me you don't like me then I'll let go of your hand and when we leave this elevator I'll walk away from you and not give you a second thought."

She looked at him and wondered what it would be like not talking to him. Prior to today they didn't say anything to one another anyway. So what would be the difference? The difference, she realized, is that now she knew how he felt about her. Letting go of his hand was easy enough, but the empty sensation she felt was unexpected. In a span of seconds there was a feeling of need consuming her. This is why she avoided these kinds of feelings. She didn't want to need someone the way her parents needed one another. She didn't want to need someone's touch. As she looked at Peeta she saw the look of hurt of his face and said, "Peeta." She was about to start educating him on being self-reliant, but the drooping of his eyelids and the tender smile that barely changed the shape of his lips yet transformed his entire face, stifled her. Instead her fingers slid over his palms and their hands locked. As his hand grew warm within hers and the emptiness within slowly began to fill with a mixture of curiosity and happiness, she spoke her thoughts aloud, "I must be crazy."

His thumb brushed against the back of her hand and they sat that way until the elevator started moving. On the way up he asked her with urgency in his voice, "Will you meet me tomorrow? During lunch? Behind the oak tree?"

*She whispered her answer to him before she reconsidered, "Yes."
Their hands dropped to their sides just as the elevator doors opened.*

Peeta stood on the stage in front of the Justice Building in complete and utter silence. He wanted to tell Katniss that she would make it home. That he'd do everything in his power to see to that, but all he could do right now was follow Effie's instructions to shake one another's hands. As he felt her palm fit into his he squeezed and locked his pain filled gaze with hers, silently vowing, 'You'll come home to your mom, Katniss. You'll see Prim again. I promise. You'll have a wonderful life with Gale. I'll make sure of that.'

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74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were Chapter 3: Farewell District

12, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Three: Farewell District 12

In this chapter Peeta says goodbye, Katniss questions her and Peeta's relationship and they head to the Capitol. Again, based on my brain, the book and movie so some stuff might be out of order, but most of it is just for the fun of it.

74th Hunger Games Challenge

Both Katniss and Peeta were ushered off of the stage by Peacekeepers. Men and women, dressed in white uniforms, armed with guns, practically forbidden to smile, whose main purpose was to enforce the laws of the Capitol and dole out punishment. On normal days, within the confines of District 12, the Peacekeepers weren't as cruel as they could have been. They enforced most laws, but overlooked many. District 12 was the poorest of the districts, which meant that the Peacekeepers stationed suffered from hunger too, but on reaping day the place was crawling with officials sent in from the Capitol and even bending a law sent jolt of fear through the residents.

Katniss and Peeta got put into their own room in the Justice Building. They each had an hour to say goodbye to their loved ones.

As Katniss entered the lavish room she took brief notice of the plush comforts within, but none of them could quell the rush of thoughts going through her mind. 'Say goodbye to mom and Prim. Make sure Gale keeps them fed. You're going to die soon. You have to keep a brave face. Why did you cave into Peeta? You have to end things with him. On the train. If you end it with him then it'll be easier for both of you when you get into the arena. If the other tributes find out about the two of you, then they'll use it against you for sure. They'll torture him or you.' She had to put these thoughts out of her head right now. Right now she had to focus on Prim. On her mother. Mostly Prim.

The second the door opened and Prim entered, Katniss held her arms open to her sister; engulfing her tiny frame in a hug. "No, Katniss!" Prim's cries hadn't subsided one ounce since Katniss volunteered for her. "You can't go! You can't."

"Hey," Katniss soothed her sister. "Stop that now. No crying."

"You could win, you know." Prim said in an encouraging voice; trying her best to be a support system for her big sister. "You can hunt."

"And I'm smart," Katniss added.

"So you'll try? You'll try and win?"

With a nod of her head, Katniss forced herself to speak in a steady tone when she answered, "Yes."

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Peeta sat in silence with his elbows on his knees and his fingers crossed over the bridge of his nose. His oldest brother came in first. Peeta lifted his eyes to him and then rose. He tried not to cry, but it was too late. The tears just seemed to pour down his cheeks in a steady stream. His brother took him in his arms and said, "I'm sorry." They stood in an embrace for a few minutes until his other brother entered.

When his other brother took him in his arms he said, "I didn't know what to do. I didn't know if I should've volunteered like Katniss did."

Peeta interrupted him, "No. I wanted to go."

"Why?"

"She needs to come home." Peeta choked back his tears and gripped his brother's shoulders. "She's got to come home. She's got to."

His brother held onto him realizing what Peeta was saying. "I don't want you to die."

"I have to," Peeta whispered. They squeezed each other one last time and then Peeta gently pushed him away. "Go on. Tell dad to come in." Before his brothers left the room he stopped them. "Hey. I love you guys." His family wasn't much for showing emotion, but this was the last time he was going to see them and he wanted them to know that he loved them.

Peeta expected his father to come into the room, but when his mother walked in, he held his breath. He hadn't prepared himself for her yet. His face was still covered in tears from his brothers' visit. He absently wiped at his running nose with his sleeve and waited for his mom to say something. She stood next to him and reached out awkwardly to pat his back. It wasn't much, but it was something and it felt strangely

good to receive his mother's touch out of love instead of fear. Normally she was hitting him, threatening him, not comforting him.

"Well, Peeta. At least District 12 might actually have a winner this year." Peeta couldn't believe it. After all the years of thinking his mother hated him. All the years that he cowed under her fist, she actually thought he could win this thing. He wouldn't win, but just the thought of her believing in him gave him a sense of hope that his mother actually loved him. "She's a survivor that one." His mother's accentuated the statement with a few raps on his back.

All of Peeta's hope was shattered. No, this woman, his mother, didn't love him after all. She never had. 'I was just free labor,' he thought to himself. 'Actually, I cost her money. I ate her food and she had to clothe me. She's probably grateful I'm going into the Hunger Games,' he thought. 'One less mouth to feed, but then who will decorate your precious cakes mother dear?' He heard her words again, "*She's a survivor...*" and didn't try to hide what he was thinking.

"Yes, she is, mother. That's what I'm counting on." His mother just gave him a strange look and he said, "If you don't mind, I'd like you to leave now." He wished the tears were gone, but they weren't. Now he had regret added onto the pain.

His father entered the room just as his mother was stepping out. Peeta flew into his arms and let the tears flow. Gripping his father's back, he wished he could go back in time. Back to his childhood when his father was his hero and reaping day meant a celebration dinner, not panic and fear.

"You need to try and come home, Peeta." His father's voice was desperate. "Promise me."

"Dad, I can't." Peeta's words barely came out.

"You have to," his father sounded hysterical. "We can keep them fed. We can make sure her family has food."

"No, dad. No." Peeta pulled away from his father. "I can't come back here without her. I can't do that. Don't ask me to do that, Dad."

"But you're going to ask me to be okay with you killing yourself?"

"Yes." Peeta lifted his eyes to his father's. "I love her." He walked to his father and took his hand in his. "I love her."

Gripping his son's hand tightly, Peeta's father said resigning, "I know." They stood in silence for a few seconds until he said, "I'll still make sure Prim eats."

"Thanks, Dad. I appreciate that, but...what about mom?"

"Don't worry about your mother. She's not in charge of the bakery. I am."

Peeta couldn't help but be amazed. His whole life he had wanted his father to stand up to his mother; to take his side, and now that Peeta was going into the arena his father had finally found the courage to stand up to the woman for Prim's sake. 'Those Everdeen women sure have a lot of power over men,' he thought to himself.

With one last hug and a kiss on the cheek, his father said, "I love you, Peeta."

"I love you too, Dad."

"Stay strong. Fight hard for her."

"That's my plan."

"I'm proud of you, son."

"Thanks, Dad." Peeta spoke morosely to the closed door, "Bye, Dad."

When the door opened up and Delly Cartwright entered, Peeta was surprised to see his lifelong friend crying hysterically. Delly, who was always bubbly and chipper, threw her arms around Peeta's neck and said, "You're not coming back, are you? You're going to die out there just so you can protect her and don't tell me you're not because I've spent my whole life watching you fawn over her and I know you and I know what you're going to do Peeta. I know your plan."

"Stop it, Delly." Peeta was crying into her shoulder. "Don't do this."

"Why? Because I'm right?" She asked with a touch of accusation in her voice.

"Delly, I need somebody to be strong for me. Please."

"I can't be strong, Peeta. I just can't," she blubbered. "I thought after you two started dating that maybe things would finally work out for you two and now..."

Delly and Madge Undersee had been the only two people that knew about Peeta and Katniss relationship. Katniss wasn't allowed to date anyone because her mother thought she was too young and Peeta promised to keep it a secret, but neither one of them could figure out a way to be together which is where Delly Cartwright and Madge came in. No one questioned Peeta's friendship with Delly and Katniss had lunch with Madge every day. Since Delly was friendly with everyone it seemed normal when she began a friendship with Madge. There were some odd looks at first, but no one suspected it after a while. Katniss would use Madge as an excuse to meet Peeta. Peeta would use Delly as an excuse to meet Katniss and no one was the wiser.

"Delly, Katniss and I really appreciate all you've done for us. You really helped us out when...when..." Peeta couldn't control himself. He kept picturing all the afternoons he and Katniss spent behind the big oak tree; out of everyone's view, holding hands, talking about the woods, telling her about his love of art, sharing their secrets and whispering their hidden wishes aloud. The first time he held Katniss in his arms Delly walked up to them and told them it was time to go to class. She had blushed when she came upon them. Peeta had climbed the tree that afternoon and almost broke his leg getting out of it, climbing really wasn't his thing. He carved his and Katniss initials in the giant oak and surrounded them with a heart. He never told Katniss about it. "Delly, when Katniss gets home. Take her to the tree and show her the heart with our initials in it. Will you do that for me?"

Delly nodded frantically. "Yes. But you have to come home too."

"I can't, Delly. One winner."

"Oh, Peeta." She cried. "I hate this." They hugged tightly. "You've been such a great friend to me. She's so lucky to be loved by you."

"Thanks." Peeta kissed her forehead and said, "See ya around, Delly." Watching her close the door behind her, Peeta felt a sense of finality come over him. There was no one else to say goodbye to which meant all his ties to District Twelve had been severed. Wiping his eyes and nose on his shirt, Peeta made an attempt to compose himself. When the door opened one last time he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Peeta."

"Gale," Peeta's tone was questioning.

Gale stood stone still as he said, "You can't kill her. Just promise me that. No matter what you do in the arena, *you* won't kill her."

He didn't know what to expect from Gale, but this was the last thing.
"She's coming home, Gale. I'll make sure of that."

The look on Gale's face was shock. "So you'll...protect her?"

"I'll do whatever I have to; to make sure she wins this thing."

The stiff posture Gale had slumped when he sat on a small sofa and his entire demeanor seemed to go into some sort of strategic mode.
"What about the Careers? They're going to want to kill her for sure."

"I don't know yet. I don't really have a plan."

"Well you'll have to get one in motion. Katniss started working on a plan the moment she volunteered. You can bet on that."

"Good. She'll need one."

"Are you sure about this, Peeta?"

"Sure about what?"

"Are you willing to die for her? You barely know her."

'If only you knew,' he thought, and though Peeta wasn't about to divulge the details of his relationship with Katniss, he did want Gale to know the truth. "I know I'd die for her."

Gale couldn't believe what he was hearing, but he wasn't going to question it. He just nodded and shook Peeta's hand. "Don't worry about the Careers. I'm sure you'll think of something. Maybe Haymitch can figure something out."

"Yeah...something. I'm not sure what though. My head's not really in the Game yet."

"Well you're going to have to get it in the Game and quick."

It was hard enough coming to terms with his own death, on the possibility of Katniss's death and Gale was standing in front of him asking him to instantly come up with a plan? Everyone knew that the Careers usually won the Hunger Games. The Careers were from Districts 1, 2 and 4. Though they weren't allowed to train for the Games, they practically did. By the time reaping day came around they had more volunteers than they knew what to do with. People like Katniss were a rarity in the outer districts. Peeta spoke his thoughts out loud, "I don't know how I'm going to beat the Careers."

"Well, if you can't beat 'em...join 'em."

"Yeah, right." Peeta walked Gale to the door. "Gale, I need you to promise me something."

"Sure."

It had been on his mind since Prim's name had been called. "I promise I'll take care of Katniss in the arena, but I need you to promise me you'll take care of her when she gets home."

Though there was a hint of question written on Gale's face, he still said, "I promise," then shook on it with Peeta.

Both men had their own thoughts on what just happened. Peeta knew it would drive Katniss crazy if she found out about their deal, but he didn't care and Gale hoped Katniss never found out that he and Peeta were discussing her future.

When Gale left the room Peeta sat on a chair and felt relief that Katniss would be taken care of for the rest of her life. Gale would take care of her. 'She'll spend her life with Gale. Gale. Gale. Not you

Peeta,' he thought. And once again his impending death was first and foremost on his mind. This time the tears were cleansing. 'Just once more,' he thought. 'I'll cry once more and then no more. I won't let myself cry anymore. There's nothing more that can be done, but for now I can feel remorse for the life I'm about to lose. For the love that I'm no longer allowed to explore. For the future I have to give to another man.'

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The automobile that would take them to the train station, waited outside of the Justice Building for the pair of tributes and their escort. The effects of the afternoon were written all over Peeta's face. Katniss took notice of his swollen, red rimmed eyes and had no doubt that he had spent his time crying though she hadn't shed a tear. She had said her goodbyes to Prim, her mom, her friend Madge, who had given her a pin of a mockingjay to take into the arena with her as her district token. She said goodbye to Gale and of all people, Peeta's father. She was relieved to hear him say he'd keep Prim fed, and briefly wondered if he knew about her and Peeta, then quickly put it from her mind. Prim was loved by everyone, so it shouldn't have come as a surprise that the man would be willing to help her sister. None of those things brought Katniss to tears. The fact was she couldn't afford them. She kept telling herself this as she rode in the vehicle with Effie Trinket and Peeta which helped to keep the waterworks at bay.

As Effie rattled on and on about the train ride and how lucky Katniss and Peeta were to experience all the luxuries the Capitol provided, Katniss spent the car ride trying to figure out how to end things with Peeta. 'It's for the best,' she thought to herself. 'Let him hate me now.'

Let him resent me prior to the arena.' The second they were alone together she vowed to tell him that it was over. They could no longer continue their relationship. They had to be enemies in order for their survival. But only one of them could survive and as sick as it made her, it had to be her. She closed her eyes and swallowed the lump in her throat; hating herself in that moment. Despised herself, really, but she had to do this for Prim. She promised Prim she would try to win and the only way she could do that is if the boy sitting on the other side of Effie Trinket was just another tribute.

There was a pause in Katniss's step as she entered the Tribute Train. Marble tables, crystal chandeliers and enough food to feed her family for a month was enough to cause her head to spin. Before she could take it all in, the sound of her escort came from behind her.

"Isn't it to die for?" Asked Effie Trinket.

'Literally,' thought Katniss.

Coming from behind Effie, Peeta's eyes darted around the room. The sight of it made his stomach churn. 'How many children have died over the years so the people of the Capitol could live like this on a daily basis?' He wondered, but the mixture of aromas filling the air eventually got to him and his empty stomach growled. Though he was hungry, he didn't touch a thing.

"Come. Come," Effie motioned them into the sleek train. Just then the train started to move causing Katniss and Peeta to take hold of the closest stationery object. "Isn't it amazing? Over two hundred miles per hour and you can barely feel a thing." They followed their escort through the first train car and into another which was one long hallway with doors. "You each have your own quarters." Effie said as she opened the first door and showed Katniss her accommodations. "Feel free to wear whatever you like, there's plenty of clothing." Pointing out

the private bath to her left, Effie invited Katniss to take a shower or do whatever she wanted. "Simply be ready for dinner in an hour." And that was the last Katniss saw of Effie Trinket for the time being.

Alone in her room Katniss sat on the edge of the bed running her hands over the silky comforter and allowed her thoughts to consume her. 'It's soft, but not warm like Peeta's lips. Stop it, Katniss,' she mentally chided herself. 'You can't think about him anymore. Not like that.' Looking for a way to take her mind off of her current predicament, she opened the dresser drawers and couldn't help but wonder why all of the clothing within was in her size, but the soft rap on her door interrupted her.

"Peeta." It wasn't surprising to see him standing there, but it was cause for concern. "You shouldn't be here."

"Let me in before someone comes," he whispered.

Glancing down the hall in both directions and finding it empty, she said, "You should leave."

"I'm not leaving so let me in." He pushed past her and entered her room.

Taking a deep breath Katniss closed the door thinking, 'Might as well get this over with now.' However, the second she faced Peeta he pulled her into his embrace and she felt as though her heart was being crushed. She didn't want to feel his arms around her. She didn't want to need him, but she did. Her fingers dug into his back and she pulled him closer to her.

They stood in silence for a minute until he said, "Don't worry. It's going to be all right," but they both knew it wouldn't be.

"No, it's not, Peeta." Reminding herself of what she had to do, she pushed him away. "Twenty four tributes go in and only one of us comes out. One."

"Yes, and that's you."

She stared at him and shook her head in disbelief. "What...what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that you're going to win this thing." He walked to her, but she instantly recoiled. "Don't. Don't pull away from me."

"I have to."

"I'm asking you not to."

"I have no choice, Peeta. We can't keep doing this. It has to end." She could feel the tears burning in the back of her nose, but she pushed them away. She needed to find the girl she was before she was stuck in the elevator with Peeta; before she knew the touch of his hand and the safety of his arms. She was stronger then. She had a tough exterior that matched her inner one until Peeta came along. Somehow she let him chip away at it and she resented him for it. She was going to be in the Games now. She had to fight for her life. For her family's lives and she couldn't let anything cloud her judgment.

"What has to end?" A confused expression creased his brow.

"This. You and me. This whole thing between us." Katniss began walking in circles around her room. "It can't go on."

Peeta couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You're...you're breaking up with me?" He watched her pace and tried to fight the feeling of

betrayal creeping up on him. "Katniss? Are you actually dumping me? On the day I've been reaped?"

The way he said it made her sound like she was the lowest person on the face of the earth for even considering doing such a thing. She halted in her tracks and tried to explain herself. "Not dumping you exactly."

"Then what are you saying? Because it sounds like you're *exactly* dumping me." Accusation filled his eyes as he stared her down. "Katniss, I've lost everything today." He ran his hand over the back of his neck; a nervous habit of his, and said, "I don't think I could take it if I lost you too."

A million thoughts rushed through her head. 'We're fighting to the death. I have to murder strangers...children. I might die. Peeta might die. Oh my God. Peeta might die.' All of her plans were out the window with the thought of his death and rushed into his arms. "We can't let the other tributes know about us. They'll see it as weak. They'll use it against us." She pressed her lips hard against his cheek and squeezed her arms around his neck.

"Okay, Katniss. I won't tell anyone."

"Promise?" She pulled back to look into his face. "Promise me you won't give it away to the other tributes?"

"I promise. Just...don't leave me. Don't scare me like that again, okay?"

"Okay." She couldn't do it. As much as she wanted to, she couldn't end her relationship with Peeta. Once they got to the Capitol, they would wind up separating anyway. In the meantime, she couldn't break his heart. If this was all they had left, then she would take it.

"Swear it?" Peeta made her promise.

"I swear." The sound of his sigh and feel of his warm breath stirring the hair by her ear sent a jolt through her. "Peeta, I don't want you to die."

"I don't want to die, but if I have to so you can live, than that's what I'll do."

"Don't say that."

"It's how I feel."

"We should've run away this morning. We should've just run into the woods and not looked back."

"And then what would've happened to Prim?"

"We could've taken her with us." Katniss attempted a grin. "Of course she probably wouldn't have made it a half of a mile, but it's a nice thought."

"Yeah. It's a nice thought." Peeta leaned down and kissed her lightly and then sat on her bed and patted the spot next to him. When she sat down he said, "Know what I thought about today when Delly came to see me? I thought about the first time you came to meet me by the oak tree at lunch."

Katniss squeezed Peeta's hand and said, "I remember that day."

"You had a scowl on your face." He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Yup, just like that one."

Her scowl deepened. "I'm not scowling."

Peeta chuckled at her. "It went away though."

Remembering his expression that day she said, "You looked like a cat that caught the canary."

"Did I?" His knowing smirk was accentuated by the narrowing of his eyes.

"Yes," Katniss smiled timidly at the memory. "I didn't know what I was doing there. The entire time I walked there I kept telling myself I was nuts."

"I kept hoping you would show up."

"I told you I would."

"But what if you had changed your mind?"

"Then I would've gone there and told you I changed my mind. I wouldn't have just left you there wondering."

"Delly didn't know what to think when I asked her to have lunch out there."

"Madge thought I was insane when I asked her to go out there with me. And when we saw you and Delly she just stared at me like I had a screw loose."

Peeta started laughing. "Remember when they sat down to eat and Delly started talking to her? Madge said, 'I'm not much of a talker,' and Delly said, 'That's okay. I am.'" They both laughed at the memory.

"I thought Madge was going to leave right then and there, but she didn't."

Peeta lifted Katniss fingers to his lips and placed a kiss on them. "No, she didn't. Then I got to spend my lunch eating strawberries with you."

The berries had been the last of the season and their growth dwarfed by the cold weather coming on. "They were crushed."

"They were delicious."

They sat in silence before Peeta said, "I better go before I get caught in here."

Unsure of what the rules were for fraternization between tributes, Katniss said, "Let me check the hall first."

Peeta snuck back into his room and took a shower. It was a strange thing standing in a tub instead of sitting in one. He actually preferred the shower to the tub, but mostly because there was hot water at the ready; a rare thing in District 12. When he was done he got dressed in a pair of pants the Capitol had provided as well as a shirt. 'Might as well enjoy the lap of luxury while you can, Peeta,' he thought to himself. It was time, he realized, to start forming a plan. 'How do you win the Hunger Games?' He silently asked himself. Well there was one person that could answer that question: Haymitch Abernathy, an actual victor. He was the only living mentor of District 12 and the lifeline to Katniss and Peeta as far as the Games were concerned. Peeta was going to have to pick his brain and set off to find him. As he walked through the train cars he found his mentor in the bar car with a glass of amber liquid in his hand and his head slumped. "Haymitch?"

"Wha..." The rest of the word was obliterated with a belch.

"I just wanted to introduce myself. I'm Peeta Mellark." He stuck his hand out in an attempt to shake Haymitch's, but the man didn't care one bit.

"I'm taking a nap," was the only thing Haymitch said before he deserted Peeta and headed towards his quarters.

Haymitch was a lost cause. Now Peeta knew he would have to do a lot more than to rely on his mentor to make sure Katniss won these Games. From this point on he was going to have to love the Capitol and all the people in it. Those are the people that the Games were designed for. That's where the sponsors came from and you needed sponsors to win, but how did he get Katniss sponsors? That was the question.

Dinner was served in the dining car and Peeta was starving. When Effie made a comment about the tributes from the previous year eating with their fingers he wanted to say something about them never having enough food to eat with a fork and knife, but then he watched as Katniss finished her meal with her fingers and it took all he had not to laugh. He wanted to join her, but he had made a vow to make the people from the Capitol love him and that included Effie Trinket. She wasn't able to sponsor them, but she was their escort and he was sure she had some kind of pull in the Capitol.

When the meal was over he knew he had eaten too much. Apparently Katniss had too. She looked a little green around the gills, but he needed his strength. He had to put on weight if he was to take on the Careers and he *would* take them on.

Effie suggested they watch the recaps of the reappings on the television. Katniss and Peeta follow her and sat precariously close to one another on the sofa without realizing it, but Effie paid them no mind so neither worried about it. Once the recaps begin everyone's eyes are glued to the television screen anyway, and they all take note of this year's competition. From District 1 an arrogant looking boy and a breathtaking girl, both of whom don't flinch when they're called.

From District 3 an average looking boy that Katniss pays no attention to, but Peeta feels bad for. From District 8 a boy and a girl that Katniss seems to stare past, but for some reason Peeta took notice of every one. 'They look petrified,' he thought to himself. 'Like the majority of us.'

They both noticed the crippled boy from District 10 and when the little girl from District 11 named Rue was called found Peeta's hand and linked her fingers with his; hiding them in the sofa cushions. She was grateful for his reassuring grip as they watched their own reaping. Reliving the horror of Prim's name being called out and Katniss volunteering was equally as painful in the retelling as the actual experience of it.

Too fixated on her own television appearance to notice how distraught Katniss and Peeta were, Effie said snidely, "Your mentor has a lot to learn about presentation. A lot about televised behavior."

Peeta tried to make light of the situation for Katniss's benefit. "He was drunk. He's drunk every year."

Katniss joined in, "Every day." They laughed into each other's eyes, because at this point there was really nothing else they could do.

"Yes," Effie's lips pursed tightly together and her tone scolded. "How odd you two find it amusing. Your mentor is your lifeline to the world in these Games. The one who advises you, lines up your sponsors, and dictates the presentations of any gifts." Her voice jumped an octave, "Haymitch can well be the difference between your life and your death!"

Her words hit Peeta in the gut like a punch. He needed Haymitch. Katniss needed Haymitch. Peeta didn't care what it would take; he

would get Haymitch to help them out no matter what. If it killed him, and it would kill him, Katniss was going to go home.

As if on cue, Haymitch entered the room, mumbling some incoherent sentence, but stopped midway through in order to vomit the contents of his stomach at their feet. Accentuating her point, Effie screeched, "So laugh it up!"

The sight of their mentor in a pool of his own puke had Peeta coming to his senses and thinking, 'I've got a lot of work to do.'

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74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were Chapter 4: Mentor, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Game Challenge

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Four: Mentor

In this chapter, Peeta's starts to form a strategy, Gale learns something important and Haymitch gets his head in the Games. The story is all for fun. I own nothing, but I'm using the book and movie as a guideline. Things are out of order and some things might be missing, but that's the way I'm writing it. Such is life. Happy Reading!

We Always Were

Gale left the Justice Building and walked quickly through the thinning crowd. There had been several thousand people just over an hour ago all waiting to hear the names of the children being called to their imminent deaths. Now there were only a couple of hundred left slowly making their way back home. Parents were hugging their children, grateful that their lives had been spared for another year. Some were celebrating their last year of the reaping. They had survived six consecutive years of their names in the reaping bowl without being called. Gale would never have to face it again, but Katniss had to face the Games. The thought of this had his insides churning. He stared at the dirt road as he made his way home...to the woods...he didn't know where he was going. There was a dull throbbing sensation forming at his temples and a clenching in his chest that refused to go away. He wondered where Katniss was. On the train? In a car? On her way to the Capitol? He had no clue how much time had passed since he had left her room in the Justice Building, but it already felt like an eternity.

"I didn't even know she was old enough for the reaping." Gale's ears picked up on conversations going on around him.

"That was the bravest thing I've ever seen."

"I don't know what her family's going to do without her."

"Well maybe it's a good thing." Gale's head lifted in search of the person who thought being in the Hunger Games could be good. "If she wins, then we'll all benefit from it. Extra food for a year..."

"If *she* wins? Have you no conscience?" The angry male voice sounded familiar, but it was usually mild mannered, not filled with disgust.

"You don't actually think Peeta can win, do you?"

"My God, that's your son you're talking about." Gale saw the baker and his wife up ahead of him in a heated discussion. He stepped behind a tree to his right and took shelter.

"All I'm saying is that Peeta isn't the bravest of boys."

"Shut up. Just shut up. He is braver than you know." The baker spoke in a low powerful voice. "That boy...that man...our son..." his fists clenched at his sides as he gave his head a shake. "I have stood by his whole life and watched you bully him. Turned a blind eye to all the bruises, the welts...cuts, but not anymore. I will not stand by and let you call him a coward when he's going to put his life on the line for the woman he loves."

Gale's eyes flew open and he stepped out from his hiding spot to get a better look at the pair to find that the baker had his wife's arm in a grip.

"Our son is going to risk his life in that arena so that young lady can come home to her family because he's in love with her. So don't stand there and say he isn't brave. He's the bravest person I know. He could certainly teach you a thing or two." The baker threw his wife's arm down and said, "I'm going home," and left his wife standing in the road with a look of shock on her face.

Leaning against the tree, Gale tried to make sense of what he had just heard talking it through his mind. 'Peeta's in love with Katniss. Peeta's in love with Katniss? Is that why he was so willing to die for her in the arena? Is that why he wanted to make sure she was taken care of if and when she got home,' Gale wondered?

"He'll do everything in his power to make sure she comes home."

Madge had materialized out of thin air and was standing right before Gale. "What?"

"Peeta. He'll try his hardest to make sure Katniss comes home."

'What does she know?' Gale thought. "Will he?"

"Yes. He's a good person, Gale." She started to walk away then turned around and said, "I'm sorry about Katniss, Gale. I really am."

The entire day thus far felt like a dream to Gale; a very bad dream. He started walking to the woods. Slowly at first then his feet gradually got faster and faster until he was running. When he got to the fence that separated the woods from District 12 he didn't even bother checking to see if it was on or if there was anyone watching. He just shimmed through the opening and made his way to the rock ledge where he took shelter. He started picking at the leaves on some surrounding plants and staring into space. 'Why wouldn't Peeta be in love with Katniss? She was easy to fall in love with,' he thought. Gale had fallen

in love with her himself not too long ago. He had no idea if Katniss was even aware of Peeta's feeling for her, but the one thing he did know for certain was that the feeling wasn't mutual. Katniss would never allow herself to enter a relationship with anyone. She made that perfectly clear to Gale many times over the years. Besides, she and Gale told each other everything and Katniss never mentioned knowing Peeta let alone having any sort of feelings for the baker's son. After thinking about it, Gale found Peeta's feelings for Katniss a welcomed relief. Now he knew that Peeta would fight just as hard as himself for Katniss's life. He heard Peeta's words in the back of his mind, "*I know I'd die for her,*" and Gale believed he would.

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Katniss and Peeta took in the scene around them. Haymitch was lying in a pool of his own vomit. It was repulsive and smelled even worse. He mumbled a few things about the smell and smeared his filth across his own face. The sight, not to mention the stench, almost made them both lose their dinner. Sharing a disgusted look with one another, Katniss and Peeta acted by tactic agreement to get their mentor cleaned up.

'This is the man that's supposed to keep them alive?' He silently asked himself. It would take some sort of miracle as far as Peeta was concerned, but he'd figure out a way to get through to their mentor.

"I'll take it from here," offered Peeta after he and Katniss dumped Haymitch in the shower fully clothed.

Katniss suggested that she send in some Capitol attendants, but Peeta needed time to think over the scenario. How was he to get Haymitch sobered up enough to mentor them? Besides he really didn't want any Capitol attendants around. Just because he swore he'd get the people of the Capitol to like them didn't mean he had to surround himself with them every moment of the day.

"No. I don't want them."

"Okay, Peeta." Katniss placed her hand on his back and gave it a little rub. "Goodnight."

"night, Katniss."

Haymitch didn't notice the cold water raining down on him as he sat in the shower fully clothed. Peeta left him there as he dug through the drawers for clean clothing. When he found what he needed he rushed back into the bathroom for fear that the man might have passed out and could a person drown in a shower? Peeta didn't know so he hurried back. When he got there Haymitch had his eyes open and was staring at Peeta.

"What the hell boy? I'm in the shower!"

"Yeah, because I put you there. So shut up." Peeta stripped the rest of Haymitch's clothing off with barely any complaints from the drunken man and washed as much of the vomit off of him as possible. When he was done he threw him a towel and said, "Can you dry yourself off or do I need to do that too?"

"No. I can do it," but Haymitch's words came out slurred together.

"Good." Peeta took a breath realizing that he needed to be nice to Haymitch. He had to get this man to like him and Katniss. Haymitch's

help was imperative to Katniss' life. "I laid out some clothes for you on the bed. Do you need anything else? Some water maybe?"

"I could use a drink."

Peeta stared at him thinking; surely he doesn't want more alcohol. "I'll get you a glass of water."

Haymitch watched the boy go to the pitcher and pour the glass of water and bring it to him. 'Well he's not squeamish, I'll give him that,' he thought to himself. "Not exactly the kind of drink I was looking for," he mumbled.

Peeta helped him with his clothes and got him into bed. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Morning."

"What?" Peeta didn't make out what Haymitch had said.

"Meet me in the morning. We'll talk." Haymitch liked the kid. He didn't think he'd live one day in the arena, but he might as well give the kid a few pointers.

"Okay. See you in the morning." Peeta's spirits lifted a bit. Haymitch was willing to talk to him in the morning. Maybe by then he'd be sober.

On his walk down the hall towards his quarters he took notice of Katniss's closed door and was tempted to steal a few minutes with her, but changed his mind at the last minute. It was late and she was probably sleeping. He really wanted to see her, but he couldn't risk being caught by any of the Capitol people, so he entered his room, took another shower to rid himself of Haymitch's effluvia and went to sleep.

Thoughts of the reaping invaded his dreams. Katniss volunteering for Prim. His name being called and the face of the little girl from District 11, Rue standing on the stage next to a monstrous boy from the same district. Effie Trinket's face seemed to loom over him in a twisted image. Her mouth was distorted. "Primrose Everdeen. Peeta Mellark." Peeta's eyes flew open at the sound of his name being called out. It was 5:00am. There would be no more sleep for him.

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As Katniss lay in bed that night she thought of Prim. Was she crying? She was grateful for their cat, Buttercup. Initially Katniss wanted to drown the damn cat, but Prim begged her not to. As it turned out Buttercup became a good mouser and caught the occasional rat. Their mother fed him entrails so it wasn't much of a burden having the extra mouth to feed and the cat would be a comfort to Prim tonight. Gale entered her thoughts on more than one occasion. He had wanted to run into the woods with her and their families. What would he have thought if Katniss had suggested that they bring Peeta and his family? Then there was Peeta. Thought of him plagued her throughout the night. The thought of him dying caused her heart to ache. These past few months she had seen him in pain, but he would never really talk about it. She remembered one moment in particular. They had met for lunch at their usual spot...

"Hi," she walked up to Peeta and was greeted with a shy grin. As she put her arms around him for a hug he grimaced. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just fell...on some stairs."

She could tell he was lying. "Stairs?"

"Yeah," He sat down and took her hand in his.

"Let me see."

"No. It's fine. Don't worry about it."

Katniss let go of his hand and stood behind him trying to peek behind his collar to see where he was hurt but Peeta kept ducking.

"Katniss don't worry about it. It's nothing." When she accidentally brushed his injury with her hand he jumped and let out a howl of pain.

"That's not nothing. Let me look at it." She refused to back down regardless of the displeased look Peeta shot her. "I'm just going to keep hounding you until you show it to me, so you might as well get it over with."

Peeta took a deep breath and blew it out. "Fine." He unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt to allow Katniss access.

Pulling his collar down in the back, she saw a bruise the size of a small fist and a lump in the center of it. "My God, Peeta. What happened?" She kept staring at it trying to figure out how some stairs could cause that type of injury.

"I told you. I fell down the stairs." He looked towards the crowd of trees to his left. "It's not that bad."

Katniss lifted the shirt back into place and kissed the area just above it. It was the first time she had ever initiated a kiss. "It looks painful."

"Yeah...well..." Peeta took her hand and pulled her around to sit next to him. "It feels better now that you've kissed it." He smiled.

"My mother might be able to help with it. She's a healer you know."

"I know, but don't worry about it, Katniss. I've had worse." The instant he said it, she could see regret written all over his face.

Katniss remembered the black eye he came to school with when he was eleven years old. She knew his mother gave it to him. She had never been hit by her parents so the thought of it seemed preposterous, still she had to wonder if his injury had been given to him by his mother. "Peeta? Did your mom..."

"Katniss," He interrupted her question. "Please don't ask." Though he didn't come right out and answer her, his hanging head did. "Can we just enjoy our lunch together?"

Katniss looked at him with sorrow in her eyes. This dear sweet boy deserved so much better. The choice to let the topic drop wasn't because she didn't care about him, it was because she did. She'd hate it if someone tried to pry into her private thoughts about losing her father, and the relationship she had with her mother. She lifted his face with her free hand and looked him in the eyes. "I brought you some goat cheese."

"I brought you some stale bread," his grateful smile matched hers.

"Stale bread, huh? Bet it still tastes better than that stuff we make at home." Together they feasted on goat cheese, basil, stale bread and some left over rabbit Katniss had shot the day before.

Though Peeta had shown up many times over the months they had been dating, with cuts and bruises. Katniss rarely questioned him

about them. She just kissed the pain away and took his mind off of them, hoping that one day he would open up and talk to her about his heavy handed mother.

Staring at the ceiling above her all katniss could think was; 'Now he would never get the chance.'

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When Peeta met Haymitch in the breakfast car he was surprised to see his mentor somewhat groomed and sober.

"Morning, boy. Sleep well?" Haymitch asked.

"Not really."

"Well I slept like a baby." Haymitch smiled at him. "You'll need to get as much rest as possible. Try to clear your head of things before going to sleep. Rest is very important." Haymitch noticed Peeta just standing there so he said, "Breakfast isn't going to eat itself. Sit down. Eat! You'll need to put on some weight. Extra weight will do you good."

Peeta couldn't believe it. Haymitch was actually helping him out. He sat down at the table and started digging in. When he reached for the cup of brown liquid in front of him he asked, "What's this?"

"Hot chocolate, sir." One of the Capitol attendants answered. "It's quite tasty."

Peeta didn't trust anyone from the Capitol so he broke off a piece of roll and dipped it into the frothy liquid before sampling it. To his

surprise it was scrumptious. He instantly felt horrible for thinking bad thoughts about the Capitol attendant. "Thank you," he called out to him. "It's very good."

The attendant nodded his head and gave Peeta a little smile.

It was time to get down to business. "Haymitch, I've got some questions for you."

"So eager." Haymitch poured some clear liquid into a glass of red juice.

He needed Haymitch sober for Katniss and sent his mentor a deadly glare. "What's the best way to win the Games?"

"Stay alive."

Peeta rolled his eyes. "I know that, but how do you stay alive? How do you beat the Careers? How do you find shelter?" Peeta started rattling off question after question.

"Whoa. Whoa. Whoa." Haymitch held up his hands. "First of all, you don't beat a Career unless you *are* a Career. It's close to impossible."

This caused a problem for Peeta. He was hoping Haymitch could solve his Career dilemma for him. Turned out he was no help whatsoever in that department.

"The fact is you need sponsors Peeta. Sponsors can be the difference between life and death out there. A book of matches, a bit of bread, some water...can save your life. And the only way to get that is to make sure people like you. They've got to like you." He paused before adding, "As far as shelter goes, you look for it or you build it yourself, but it's got to look natural; like it was part of the environment. Not

something man made. Finding or building shelter is a very important thing, because when nightfall hits you know the Gamemakers are going to drop the temperature out there so trying to stay warm is a big factor. You could freeze to death just as easily as be killed by a tribute."

"No, because I'd build a fire."

"That's a good way to get killed."

"What's a good way to get killed?" Katniss picked up the end of their conversation.

"Come in. Come in." Haymitch motioned to her. "Sit. Eat. I was just telling Peeta here the best way to win the Games."

Katniss stared at Peeta and then turned her attention to Haymitch. "So what's the best way to win the Games?"

Haymitch repeated the advice he gave to Peeta, "Stay alive."

Peeta was upset. The entire time he was talking to Haymitch he kept thinning out his red juice with the clear liquid in his flask and once again he was getting drunk. He needed him to be sober for Katniss's sake. "Very funny. Only not to us!" Peeta knocked the glass out of Haymitch's hand and it shattered onto the floor. The fist Haymitch threw at Peeta's jaw was unexpected and made a loud crack. When Haymitch turned around to reach for his flask Katniss grabbed a knife and drove it between his fingers into the table.

"That is mahogany!" Cried Effie from across the room, but the trio ignored her outburst.

"Well, what's this? Did I actually get a pair of fighters this year?" Haymitch said with a look of pleasure on his face.

'Great,' Peeta thought to himself. 'I spent my whole life getting beaten by my mother and now I'm a punching bag for my mentor.' He grabbed some ice out of the fruit terrain to put on his chin, but Haymitch stopped him.

"No. Leave it alone. They'll think you've mixed it up with another tribute."

"That's against the rules," said Peeta.

"Even better. You fought and you didn't get caught. Leave it," ordered Haymitch. "Stand here." Haymitch put them in the center of the room. "Turn around." He gave them a once over. "Mmmm hmmm... Not bad. Not bad at all."

Peeta and Katniss gave each other a questioning look over their shoulders and then sat at the table when Haymitch told them to.

"I tell you what. I'll stay sober enough to help you, but you have to do what I say, no questions asked. Deal?"

Katniss and Peeta looked at each other for confirmation and gave each other a slight nod. They both said "Deal."

"Good," Haymitch confirmed. "We're going to be pulling into the Capitol anytime now. When we do your stylists are going to get a hold of you. Let them do whatever they want to you and no arguments."

Katniss immediately said, "But..."

"No arguments!" Haymitch snapped at her.

Katniss glared at him. She hated making deals.

The candy colored buildings of the Capitol came into view and the District Twelve tributes rushed to the window to see the city they had only viewed on television, but it only lasted a few seconds before everything went black. They were in the tunnel that ultimately led to the defeat of the thirteen districts during the rebellion so many years ago. When they emerged from the tunnel the Capitol stood before them in all its glory. Peeta and Katniss peered through the window of the tribute train taking it all in. The city was surrounded with water. The tops of the buildings had unnatural colors of pinks, greens and gold's and then there were people. They were all different colors too. To Peeta they looked like works of art. Something he might paint. To Katniss they looked like a flock of freakish birds.

Stepping away from the window, Katniss hid from the inquisitive eyes of the Capitol residents. She didn't want them to look at her. She wanted no part of these Hunger Games. No part of the Capitol and all of the people that lived here.

Peeta on the other hand knew what he had to do. Sponsors. He needed them and no one ever sponsored District 12. 'Until now,' he thought. He knew he had to put on a smile and wave, but he also had to explain himself to Katniss who was staring at him like she didn't know him. He turned to her and said, "Katniss, come on. Come on." He tried desperately to encourage her to join him. "Katniss, One of them might be rich." He looked out the train window thinking, 'Please remember us. Please sponsor us. Please save Katniss's life.'

"Here," Haymitch yanked the knife from the table and held it out to Katniss. "You're gonna need this. *He* knows what he's doing."

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74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were Chapter 5: Girl on Fire, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Five: Girl on Fire

In this chapter you'll understand why Cinna had Katniss and Peeta hold hands in front of the entire Capital during their ride in the Tribute Parade and you'll get different reactions to the event. Based on the book, movie and my brain! Enjoy!

We Always Were

Peeta and Katniss were separated when they entered the Remake Center. They were each handed off to their prep team: a group of three people that would prepare them for their stylist. Peeta's group had consisted of two women and one man. The man had a shaved head with a bright blue tattoo covering half of his scalp and part of his forehead in an intricate design. One of the women had the longest false eyelashes Peeta had ever seen. He wondered how she could blink without them getting tangled up and the other had overly voluptuous breasts and her skin was dyed in a muted shade of orange. He couldn't help but stare at her.

They began scrubbing him down with a gritty substance and talking amongst themselves as though he wasn't there. Peeta's eyes just kept following the orange girl until he finally asked her, "What's your name?"

"Excuse me?" She said.

"Your name? What is it?" He wasn't sure if he should ask, but he was curious who these people washing down his naked body were. Especially the plump orange girl.

"I'm Camellia and this is Horton and that's Apria."

"Camellia," Peeta said to himself. He looked at her once again and said, "You look like a sunset." The trio stopped what they were doing and Peeta wasn't sure if he should've said anything at all. He decided to explain himself. "That's my favorite color." When Camellia blushed he said, "Now you look like a sunrise. My second favorite color." With that Peeta was engrained into the trio's hearts.

Horton said, "Portia's going to adore you. Wait until you see what she's got planned."

"You're quite an attractive young man," said Apria. "Considering you're from District 12."

"Well he can't help that," said Camellia.

The trio went back to small talk, but when the conversation went to the reaping and Katniss volunteering for her sister, Peeta's ears picked up.

"That was very brave of her," one of the girls said. Peeta didn't know which one.

"It was, wasn't it?" He chimed in.

They all looked at him as though he had suddenly grown a second head.

Horton finished buffing his fingernails and said, "Yes, it was. That took a lot of courage." His eyes were questioning.

"Katniss loves her sister very much." Peeta wasn't sure why he was telling them this. They might catch onto the fact that he had feelings for Katniss, and he had made her a promise that he wouldn't tell anyone. No, he realized, he said he wouldn't tell any tributes and they weren't tributes. The more people in the Capitol that knew how amazing Katniss was, the better. "Katniss is an extraordinary person. She deserves to go home to her family." He watched as the trio exchanged glances and jumped slightly when he noticed the woman standing in the doorway.

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"Katniss is an extraordinary person. She deserves to go home to her family." Portia had been standing just outside the doorway for some time now, listening to Peeta talk about his fellow tribute as though she hung the moon. Whether or not the feelings he obviously had for her were mutual was another question, and one she was determined to get answered.

"Hello, Peeta. I'm Portia."

Peeta sat up from the table he was lying on and stared at his stylist. A thin woman with gold hair and crème colored skin. Her eyelashes were the same hue as her hair and her nails were long with golden flowers painted on the tips of them. She held out her hand to his and he shook it. His prep team left as Portia asked him to stand in the center of the room. She walked around him and stared at his naked body as if mentally memorizing every square inch of him.

"Here," she handed him his robe. "You can put this on now." She sat at a table and said, "Why don't you join me and we can talk?"

With the push of a button their lunch appeared before their very eyes. Peeta hadn't realized how hungry he was until the scent of the food hit his nose.

"This smells delicious. Thank you," he sat down across from her at the table. "I haven't seen you before. Are you new to the Games?"

"Yes. This is mine and Cinna's first year. Cinna is your fellow tribute's stylist."

"Sorry about that."

Portia laughed at his comment. "What on earth are you sorry about?" Her tone took on a serious quality, "I'm the one that's sorry. This shouldn't have happened to you. To any of you." Her eyes were just as remorseful as her statement.

Peeta couldn't believe his ears. Did someone in the Capitol actually feel pity on him because he was in the Hunger Games? He pushed the impossible thought out of his mind. "They always stick the new stylists with the worst district. Unfortunately that's us."

"No, Peeta. Cinna and I asked for District 12. We think the past stylists have wasted a great opportunity."

"Opportunity?"

"Yes."

"But we're coalminers." The stylist's job was to reflect each district's specialty. District 1 was gems, so it was easy to come up with their costumes each year. District 4 was fishing. District 11 specialized in agriculture and District 12 had coal.

"Exactly, Peeta. And what do we do with coal?"

"Burn it?" Peeta heard his answer in his head and his eyebrows shot up. "Wait a minute. Do what you want to me, but you cannot set Katniss on fire. If she's hurt going into the Games, she won't have a shot at winning."

Portia had wondered from the moment she stepped into the room about Peeta's feelings for his fellow tribute, and he was continuing to confirm them. "Tell me about Katniss, Peeta."

"What do you want to know?"

"For starters...how long have you been in love with her?"

Peeta choked on the food he was swallowing. He drank some water and tried to wash it down. After he tried swallowing a few more times he said, "What makes you think I'm in love with her?"

"Call it women's intuition." Portia sat there staring at him with a knowing grin on her face watching him carefully as he tried to decide what to do. "Peeta, I can help you if you let me. But the only way I can help is if you tell me the truth." She put her hand on his and said, "Tell me about Katniss."

Peeta lifted his eyes to hers and said, "I'd die for her." They sat and talked throughout the rest of their meal. When it was through Portia explained the synthetic fire that she and Cinna had created, telling Peeta that it wouldn't harm them. Peeta was dressed and ready to go.

"Head to the bottom level of the Remake Center and I'll see you there, but don't enter without me." She walked out of the room feeling sorry for the young man that loved someone so much he was willing to lay his life down for her. Portia walked through the hallway hoping she could catch Cinna before he went to the bottom level of the Remake Center. Fortunately she caught him at the elevator doors. "Cinna!"

Cinna turned his head and looked at his design partner. "Ready for this?"

"We need to talk," Portia's voice was urgent.

"Let's do it on the ride down," Cinna suggested.

"No." Portia looked over her shoulders noticing several other people starting to gather around. "In private."

Cinna took her arm and they walked down the corridor and entered an empty prep room.

Portia leaned in and whispered in his ear, "He's in love with her."

Cinna's eyes were questioning. "Who's in love with whom?"

"Peeta," she whispered. "He's in love with Katniss."

Cinna's eyes perked up. "Is she in love with him?"

Portia shrugged her shoulders. Peeta hadn't told her that and Portia hadn't asked. "All I know is that he's planning on fighting to the death for her out there."

Cinna nodded his head. As they left the now deserted floor, Cinna said, "Find Haymitch. We'll need to discuss this later."

Portia nodded her head as they went to the lower level.

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Katniss stood nervously awaiting the arrival of Haymitch...Cinna...Peeta...anyone. She was surrounded by her fellow tributes. Some of them were stunning in their outfits; District 1 was covered in jewels. She couldn't help but think of the families she

could feed for years from just one their outfits alone. District 4 looked ridiculous in their fishlike costumes, but their menacing size made up for it. Then Katniss saw her twin walking in her direction: Peeta. He was wearing a black skin tight costume that covered him from his neck to his ankles, shiny black boots that laced up to his knees, a black cape that looked like flames were shooting out of his back as he walked. Bursts of orange, yellow and red were trailing behind him and the headpiece that matched was sitting slightly askew atop his head.

"Peeta, this is going to be fabulous," said Portia as her eyes darted around the area for Haymitch.

His prep team started jabbering away about how amazing the pair was going to be, but Peeta couldn't care less about the prep team or Portia. All he cared about was Katniss. He hoped this would be safe. When he saw her standing next to the chariot and the jet black horses his heart skipped a beat. He thought they would've covered her in makeup. Instead, she looked like...herself; it was a welcomed sight. Her hair had been braided down one side of her head and she had a light dusting of shimmering powder on her face, but that was it. If it hadn't been for the outfit, she would've looked like she did every other day they met up at lunch or in the woods the other morning.

"What do you think," Katniss asked Peeta under her breath, "about the fire?"

"I'll rip off your cape if you rip off mine," he said through a fake smile. He didn't want her to worry, but it was hard when he was petrified himself.

"Deal. I know we promised Haymitch we'd do exactly what they said, but I don't think he considered this angle," said Katniss.

"Where is he anyway? Isn't he supposed to protect us from this sort of thing?" Peeta couldn't help but think Haymitch was off getting drunk somewhere while he and Katniss were about to be burned to death.

"Probably best that he's not around an open flame anyway," said Katniss.

The pair looked at each other and busted out laughing. It was nervous laughter, but it felt good to do something other than worry.

Upon taking another look at Katniss, Peeta felt his heart skip a beat and whispered in a hushed tone, "Hi." They may have been surrounded by people, but he only had eyes for her.

"Hi," she tried not to show too much emotion. Reaching up, she straightened out his headpiece. "Stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?"

She turned away from him before they gave too much away, "Like you want to kiss me or something."

He turned and faced the opposite direction from her and whispered, "But I do want to kiss you."

Cinna walked up behind the pair taking in what he had just heard and said, "This is just synthetic fire." He held out the flame in front of them and ran his fingers through it. "It won't hurt, so don't be afraid."

Katniss looked at him and said in the bravest voice she could muster up, "I'm not afraid." She had to convince herself that she wasn't. She needed to do this.

Cinna waited until the other tributes made their way into the City Center. He was nervous and hoped his idea worked. If not, at least

they looked fabulous in their black costumes. He waited until the last minute before he lit their capes on fire and then their headpieces. He blew out a breath of air and said under his breath, "It works." Then a thought seemed to hit him. "Hold hands," but his voice was drowned out by the cheering crowd.

"What did he say?" Katniss asked.

Cinna made a motion to Peeta and Peeta said to Katniss, "I think he wants us to hold hands."

When they took each other's hands Cinna nodded his approval and gave them a thumbs up sign. 'Maybe,' he thought to himself, 'this can work to our advantage.'

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Gale didn't want to watch the tribute parade from home. He didn't want his mother deciphering his every move and lately that was all she seemed to be doing. There was to be no school that day so Gale decided to spend some time in the woods. He had set snares, tried his hand at shooting some game, but he wasn't as good at using a bow and arrow as Katniss and did some gathering. There was trading to be done at the Hob and when he was done he stopped by the bakery earlier in the morning to sell some squirrels to the baker and had more of a conversation with him than he'd ever had in the past.

"Morning, Gale."

"Morning, sir."

"How're you holding up?"

"Fine, sir. How about yourself?"

"Not too good. It's lonely around here without Peeta. Bet you're feeling the same way without Katniss around."

"Sort of." Gale didn't know what to say to the man.

"How's her family doing?"

"Haven't really seen them, but I'm going by there today."

"Will you bring this to them for me?" The baker handed Gale a bag of something.

"Sure."

"Make sure you stop by here a few times a week so I can give you something for them. I promised my boy I'd keep them fed. Promised Katniss too."

Gale quietly studied the man he had been trading with for years. He wanted to know more about the baker's son, Peeta. He wanted to know about the man that was willing to die for Katniss, but the only thing Gale said was, "I will, sir. Can I give you something in return? Some berries maybe or some..."

"No. Nothing. Peeta wouldn't want me to take anything." The baker looked down at the ground.

Gale remembered what Madge had said to him the day of the reaping and repeated them for the man's sake, "Peeta's a good person."

"The best. He's very giving." The baker's eyes met Gale's. "I didn't deserve to have him as a son."

Gale felt awkward hearing the man's confession and yearned for an escape. "Well...I'll make sure Katniss' family gets this. See you soon." Gale waved goodbye and continued on his daily quests.

He brought Katniss's share to her family and the bag the baker had given to him. Unsure of what to say to Katniss's mom, Gale knocked softly on their door and made a quiet exchange with her. She had given him some goat cheese and milk as well as some herbs. They didn't speak other than to say hello, goodbye and thank you which was odd considering he knew this family since he was fourteen.

Standing in the center of the town's square, Gale waited for the tribute parade to begin on the large screen. He wondered what Katniss would be dressed as. 'Coalminer, no doubt. That's what District 12 is always dressed as,' he thought. Gale's eyes were fixated on the screen as he stared at the other tributes. He saw them during the recap of the reapings, but his mind hadn't really taken them all in. Now, however, he was transfixed on the sheer size of some of them. The boy from District 2 frightened him. He was enormous. Many of the tributes seemed like an easy kill, if Katniss could get her hands on a bow and arrow, but what if they didn't have one? Gale hoped Peeta would keep his word. He was counting on it. As he stared at the screen something caught his eyes. There was a flicker of light in the back of the procession. A fire. At first he thought the City Center was on fire and then he realized that it wasn't the center, it was Katniss.

The gasp throughout District 12 was deafening. Gale's heart stopped dead in his chest. Katniss was illuminated by flames all around her. Her eyes were like silver mirrors reflecting the glow of the fire so when they did a close up of her face, she looked as though she had fire

running through her veins. Gale heard the crowd on television chanting her name, "Katniss! Katniss! Katniss!" And then he saw their hands. Katniss and Peeta's hands were linked in a death grip and held high above their heads.

Around him all of District 12 cheered and raised their hands in triumph. Fists were being pumped into the air and Katniss's name was being chanted along with the group of people in the City Center. Katniss and Peeta's image seemed to be everywhere. The cameras scanned all of the tributes, but they kept going back to District 12. Gale's mouth went dry. His heart, which had stopped earlier, was now pounding a mile a minute. People were smacking him on the back in congratulations, cheering for the pair on screen. Gale was unmoving. Unblinking. He couldn't breathe. He listened as President Snow made a speech welcoming the tributes to the Games and thanking them for their sacrifice. Watched as the President kept glancing at Katniss and Peeta and when he ended his speech with the traditional, "Happy Hunger Games. And may the odds be ever in your favor!" Gale actually believed for a second that they might be in Katniss' favor after all.

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Peeta was grateful when Cinna suggested that he and Katniss hold hands. He hadn't touched her since the tribute train and he missed her. The fake flames that were created by Portia and Cinna were causing a tickling sensation up his back, but the adrenaline running through his veins was caused by the roar of the crowd. Katniss' hand

was clenching his and he was squeezing hers right back. He felt lightheaded and dizzy. With every step the horses made, he was sure he was going to fall off of the chariot. He listened as the crowd began to chant their names. He could hear a few faint "Peeta's" in the distance, but mostly he heard "Katniss! Katniss!"

It was then that he caught a glimpse of them in one of the television screens. 'My God!' He thought. 'She's breathtaking!' He held his head up higher and smiled with pride. For now, in that very moment, the stunning woman standing next to him was his to love and he was proud to have her by his side. Katniss tried to pull her hand away at one point, but Peeta said, "Don't let go of me. I might fall off of this thing." She smiled and gave his hand a little squeeze. The rush of excitement that ran through him almost overcame him. Cinna and Portia had outdone themselves. The people in the Capitol would be talking about the tributes from District 12 and sponsors were sure to be interested. Peeta kept glancing at the television screens noticing that the focus was primarily on him and Katniss. He couldn't take his eyes off of her. When he looked at President Snow, Peeta noticed that the man couldn't take his eyes off of Katniss either.

As they exited the City Center their prep teams raced up to them rattling on and on about how wonderful they were. Portia doused their flames with a spray from a canister and Cinna helped to remove the capes.

While stepping off of the chariot Peeta said, "Thanks for holding onto me out there. I was getting a little shaky."

"Well, it didn't show," Katniss couldn't hide the grin he provoked. "I'm sure no one noticed."

"I'm sure no one noticed anyone but you," Peeta stepped closer to her. "You should wear flames more often. They suit you."

Before she realized what she was doing, Katniss stood on her tiptoes and kissed the spot on his chin where the slight bruise had formed from Haymitch's punch. She had kissed so many of Peeta's bruises in the past that doing so now seemed natural, but once it was done, she realized what a huge mistake she had made.

Standing perfectly still both Peeta and Katniss exchanged a worried glance. They were both of the same minds in hoping that no one had seen it, but two people had.

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74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were Chapter 6: All In, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Six: All In

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

Effie Trinket had always taken her duties as an escort to District 12 very seriously with the hopes that one day she'd receive a promotion and get appointed to a better district. She was so tired of watching her tributes die year after year, but after the splash Katniss and Peeta made at the parade this year, she was almost certain that one of them could possibly get some sponsors and perhaps make it to the final eight tributes. Effie hoped this could be true. After all, if a tribute made it to the final eight their friends and families were interviewed and District 12 hadn't had camera crews in the district after the reaping for years. She did her very best talking up the pair after the parade; being very elusive about Katniss and Peeta. She really didn't know much about them, other than the obvious. They seemed to overcome adversity well enough. Peeta was very well mannered considering his upbringing. Katniss did all right, as long as she held her tongue and though they tried to hide it, they were quite enamored with one another. Effie knew this last bit of information had to be kept under wraps. Other than that, she was thrilled with making the duo sound mysterious to the residents of the Capitol, regardless of which district they came from. "When you put enough pressure on a lump of coal you get a pearl." Effie couldn't help but think she was awfully bright coming up with that analogy. She had seen Katniss and Peeta off to their rooms which was located on the top floor of the Tribute Center, their homes until they went into the arena, and went to her own quarters intending on taking a short rest before dinner, but that thought was swiftly put to rest when there was a knock on her door.

"What do *you* want?" She was normally a stickler when it came to manners, but Haymitch always brought the worst out in her.

"We need to talk. Upstairs." Haymitch wasn't thrilled about bringing Effie into this discussion, but Cinna had a good point about the woman. When it came to the survival of the tributes, she was a crucial part. She had pull with the people of the Capitol. She was one of their own; an intricate role in the behind the scenes portion of the Hunger Games.

Had Cinna and Portia not been standing alongside of him, she probably would have argued some; instead she followed the trio up to the roof. When they walked to the garden area, surrounded with the hundreds of hanging wind chimes, she knew that the conversation wasn't meant to be heard by the prying ears of the Capitol.

"We have a problem," said Portia.

"I don't think it is a problem," said Cinna. "I think it can be used to our advantage."

"What can be used to our advantage?" Effie was curious as to why they were using hushed tones.

"They're in love," said Haymitch.

"Oh," Effie knew immediately who they were speaking of. "Well I could've told you that." The other three just stared at her. Effie knew she'd have to explain herself. "I saw Peeta sneaking into her room on the train and when we were watching the recaps of the reaping I noticed Katniss taking his hand. They didn't think I saw it so..." Effie let her sentence trail off.

"And how do you suggest we use this to our advantage," Portia directed her question towards Cinna.

"Who wouldn't root for love?" He answered her with a question of his own.

Haymitch's eyes picked up. "Good point. Everybody loves a good romance."

"But how will this help them?" Effie didn't seem to understand how this could be of value to Katniss or Peeta in the arena.

"Sponsors, Effie!" Haymitch rubbed his hands together. "It'll get them sponsors. The people of this city will go nuts over unrequited love."

Effie corrected him. "It's not unrequited, Haymitch."

"Could've fooled me. The girl's as cold as ice," Haymitch said with a smirk.

"To you maybe," Cinna gave him a stern look, "but I've seen the way she looks at him when her guard is down."

"And how often have you seen her with her guard down?" Haymitch looked to the other three for a reply, getting none in return. "The answer is, not often. I've seen her around my district. Trust me when I say, the girl's a tough nut to crack." When the rest of the group shrugged their shoulders he continued, "The people around this city will go crazy over a couple of kids that haven't been able to express their love for each other. Think about it."

Portia, Cinna and Effie exchanged approving glances with one another.

"Well, I've always been partial to an unlikely romance myself," said Effie.

"Exactly!" Exclaimed Haymitch. "Now... I can get Katniss and Peeta sponsors, but who do we direct the sponsors to?" It pained Haymitch to make this kind of life and death decision, but he had no choice. Twenty four tributes go in and only one could come out. He knew who he thought it should be, but he didn't want to influence the group. "The question is...who do we save?"

"There is no question," said Portia. There was pain in her eyes as she said, "Peeta's determined to save her life."

"Everyone is enamored with Katniss as it is," said Effie. "The whole Capitol is talking about how brave she was sacrificing herself for her sister and Cinna's girl on fire has seemed to catch."

Haymitch hoped they would choose Katniss. She was the one that needed to go home. He knew a little bit about both of his tributes. The boy was a nice enough kid, but he was from town. His family could survive without him. The girl however, her family needed her around. Haymitch had seen her around the Hob when she was younger. She'd come in with her father and then one day she showed up without him. Later he found out that her dad died in the mine explosion. He felt bad for the girl, but he really didn't give her a second thought until she volunteered at the reaping. "All right. Katniss then. We're agreed?" With the choice made, Haymitch's need for a drink had become urgent, but he had made a promise to Katniss and Peeta that he couldn't afford to break.

They all nodded their heads in agreement. None of them felt good about their decision. They had just given Peeta a death sentence.

Effie lifted her fingers to her lips and she gave her head a little shake in distaste. "What's next? What do we do?"

"We need to put a plan in motion," suggested Cinna. "Any ideas?"

The three of them talked for a few minutes until they agreed upon their next step.

"I'll talk to Peeta. The three of you go get ready for dinner. I'll see you in a little while." Cinna followed them back down to their floor and headed for Peeta's room.

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Peeta was just buttoning up his shirt when he heard the knock at his door. When he answered it, he was happily surprised to see Cinna standing on the other side of it. "Hi. Nice to see you again."

"Nice to see you too." Said Cinna. He gave Peeta a once over. The boy had a genuinely sweet temperament. Cinna had noticed how courteous he had been to everyone around him including the Capitol attendants. Most people ignored the servants that stood in the background, but Peeta noticed everyone, saying hello to all of them. His prep team adored him as well as Portia. Even Haymitch and Effie liked him, but the real statement to his personality was Katniss' feelings for him. Haymitch was right when he said that she rarely let her guard down. The prep team had said she was a bit stand offish at first, but eventually she spoke to them. Still Cinna knew that the

Katniss the citizens of the Capitol were seeing wasn't real. She was putting on a mask for the people around her and the only person she genuinely let inside was Peeta. Cinna was grateful that she had allowed him glimpses of the real her as well.

"Joining us for dinner?" Peeta asked.

"Yes I am, but first, why don't you join me?" Cinna took him to the roof of the building and showed him around.

"Wow, Cinna. This is amazing, but...why do they let us up here. Aren't they afraid we'll jump off or something?"

Cinna picked up a pebble and threw it over the edge of the roof, but it bounced back in. "There's a force field."

"Oh."

Cinna didn't have long before dinner so he had to get to the point. "Hear that noise? Those are the wind chimes. Come on." He guided Peeta to the area and started talking to him in a low voice. "We can talk here without worrying."

Peeta's eyes lifted up to Cinna's. "Worrying?"

"They can't hear us if we're quiet."

"Oh," Peeta finally understood. The Capitol had eyes and ears everywhere.

"Peeta, we've come up with a plan, but in order for it to work, we need to know something."

Peeta wondered who the "we" was that Cinna was talking about, but he didn't ask.

Cinna took a deep breath. "Are you willing to put your life on the line for Katniss?"

Without hesitation Peeta said, "Yes."

"Then you do love her?"

"Yes."

"You'll need to follow Haymitch's instructions no matter what they are. Can you do that Peeta? If they're to save her life? Can you do that?"

"I'll do anything if it means Katniss can go home."

Cinna looked at Peeta and felt a pang of remorse. He wished he could bring them both back from the Games. They deserved to live. None of the tributes deserved to die.

"Haymitch and Effie will be giving you instructions."

"Effie?" Haymitch, Peeta could understand. He was his mentor, but Effie came as a complete surprise.

"Yes." Cinna grinned at Peeta. "She's a smart woman, Peeta. She knows how the people in the Capitol think."

Peeta had a hard time thinking of Effie Trinket as smart. She thought pearls came from lumps of coal. But she was from the Capitol, he thought, so maybe she understood their way of thinking.

"The important thing to remember is that you can't breathe a word of this to Katniss."

"But..."

"Not a word, Peeta. She can't know."

Peeta didn't like keeping secrets from Katniss, but if it would save her life, then he'd do it. "Okay. I won't tell her." Peeta didn't know what he was signing up for, but he hoped Katniss wouldn't hate him for it.

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Peeta went to Haymitch's room and knocked on his door.

"Made quite an entrance in the parade today, boy. People are talking."

"About Katniss, no doubt. It's hard to outshine a girl on fire." Peeta wanted to let Haymitch know that Cinna spoke with him, but he also knew that the Capitol was probably listening in.

Haymitch turned to look at him with a conniving grin and said, "Yes it is, but no worries. I'm sure the sponsors will be lining up for the two of you."

"We'll need sponsors to stay alive out there. Do you really think you can get them, Haymitch?" They both knew Peeta was asking if Haymitch could get sponsors for Katniss.

"I should be able to get a few, but we still have the training scores and the interviews to go."

"The interviews." This worried Peeta. Katniss wasn't much for talking to people. And when she did, she came off sullen and harsh. Peeta

knew a different side of her, but only because she let him in. A rarity for Katniss. "That could be a problem."

"You think?" Haymitch said sarcastically.

"Yes."

"Then we'll have to do something about that, won't we?" Haymitch was telling Peeta in no uncertain terms, that he would have to get Katniss to open up about herself. "Almost time for dinner, boy. I need to shave."

Peeta left Haymitch's room wondering how he could get the people of the Capitol to see the kind side of Katniss. The giving side of her. The side of her that came out during the reaping. The Katniss he spent his lunches with. The Katniss he fell in love with. She never let her defenses down in District 12, she couldn't afford to, so the chances of her letting it down in the Capitol were nonexistent.

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Katniss had felt like an idiot after dinner. She knew the redheaded girl that was serving them dinner looked familiar, but she just couldn't place her. Unfortunately Katniss decided to try some wine with her meal and it left her head a little cloudy and her tongue a lot loose.

"Oh, I know you." The moment Katniss said it she knew she made a terrible mistake. The look on the faces of the people around her ranged from worried to ridiculous. But Katniss kept on asking

questions about the girl, learning that she was an Avox. Better known as a traitor to the Capitol. She had her tongue cut out for her crimes and no one was allowed to talk to her unless it was to give an order. Fortunately, Peeta came to her rescue claiming she looked like Delly. Katniss knew she'd have to explain herself to Peeta, especially since he was standing against her doorway staring at her waiting with an expectant look on his face.

"Come on," he said.

Katniss followed Peeta up to the roof and when she got there she was surprised to see a glorious garden. It was so unlike the rest of the building. It didn't seem...fake. The colors were natural. The flowers were bright, but they were their own shades of yellow, red, blue... Not some died Capitol magenta. "What is this?" She asked.

"Isn't it great? Cinna showed it to me."

Katniss looked out over the city and said with a dry smirk, "Aren't they afraid we might jump?"

Peeta held his hand out and got a little zap. "Force field."

Katniss rolled her eyes. "Wouldn't want to lose one of their precious tributes."

Peeta's eyes scanned the roof. He took Katniss' hand and walked her to the area with the wind chimes. "Let's talk here," he said in a hushed voice. His eyes were urging her on.

Katniss knew she had to explain her actions at dinner. She took a deep breath and told him, "Remember when I told you about the time Gale and I had seen the boy and the girl in the woods? When the boy

got shot with a spear and the girl had a net dropped on her from the hovercraft?" Peeta nodded his head. "That was her."

Peeta's eyebrows raised in disbelief. His arms reached out to pull Katniss in an embrace. "Oh, Katniss. I'm so sorry."

Katniss' arms hung at her side as Peeta hugged her. She felt horrible for the girl. Maybe she could've saved her from the current life she was living as an Avox? Maybe the boy would still be alive if Katniss had done something? She thought to herself. She looked out at the night sky and saw the lights of the Capitol shining brightly. She was disgusted with this place and the people in it. She was angry with her situation. She could feel Peeta's lips brush against the side of her head which brought up another thought...she kissed his chin earlier in the day. What if someone had seen her do that? What if another tribute saw it? She pushed herself away from Peeta and stared at him. "You need to stop doing that." Her face was emotionless. "We really need to control ourselves while we're here, Peeta."

Peeta stood staring at her. Trying to decipher the meaning of her words. "You told me you wouldn't pull away from me anymore," he said with caution.

"Our lives are on the line." Her eyes were cold and unblinking.

"Katniss, you made a promise to me. You swore to me..."

"I know what I said, but I screwed up earlier Peeta."

"When?" Peeta thought for a second until he realized what Katniss meant. "You mean when you kissed my chin? Nobody saw you. We were standing behind the horses." But Peeta knew that wasn't true. He knew that there were at least a couple of people that saw them

and he was going to have to figure out how to use it to their advantage.

"There were people all around us. Tributes all around us. Mentors...Stylists...Prep teams...anyone could've seen it Peeta." Katniss' voice was starting to rise.

Peeta's eyes darted around the rooftop. "Keep it down," he took a hold of her arm and pulled her closer to him. "So what if someone saw it. We had the best entrance of the entire parade. It would've just looked like a celebratory smack on the cheek. Nothing more. So quit acting like you signed my death sentence."

"I very well could have." She pulled her arm out of his hold. "Or at least put a target on your back."

"I already had one there."

"Well I made it bigger."

"It doesn't matter what size it is, Katniss. Someone's going to hit the bull's eye sooner or later." His eyes looked down.

"Don't say that," Katniss' voice went from harsh to soft. The thought of Peeta dying melted her reserves. "Please don't say that."

"But it's true," he looked at her. "You're going to have to accept that."

Katniss stared into Peeta's sky blue eyes. She took in all of his features. His sandy blond hair. The way it curled at the end. She knew how soft those curls were because she had spent many afternoons wrapping them around her fingers. His skin was light and the apples of his cheeks were pink, like a new born baby's skin. Katniss' expression grew softer. She lifted her hand up to caress Peeta's cheek, "What if I

can't accept your death?" She didn't want Peeta to die. The thought of being without him physically hurt her. "What if I wanted you to go home?"

"We both know that's not what you want."

Katniss gazed at Peeta. She was confused. She wanted Peeta to go home, but she had to go home herself. Needed to go home for Prim. She closed her eyes and hung her head down. She was actually ashamed of herself. Peeta was right. She wanted to go home.

"Katniss. It's okay," he said. "I want you to go home too." He lifted her chin up with his knuckle so she'd look at him. "I can't go home, Katniss. There's nothing left for me there. Everything I want is standing right in front of me."

Katniss opened her eyes and looked at Peeta. She blinked as his head started dipping towards hers. Her eyelids drooped as his hands slid around her waist and glided up her back. Her lashes brushed against his cheeks as his lips finally met their destination.

Their kiss was unhurried and tender. Nothing like the one they shared in the woods the morning of the reaping. This one was tentative at first and gradually progressed into something further. Their tongues stroked one another's in a tender caress. Their lips were moist and full of persuasion.

Peeta's heart threatened to leap out of his chest as she trailed her fingers across his back and around his waist. When Katniss ran her hands through his hair and pulled his head closer for a deeper kiss, Peeta thought she was treating him to a new form of glorious torture. He gripped her around the waist and lifted her up so that her feet were dangling off the ground.

Katniss could feel her legs floating in the air. Her chest was pressed against Peeta's body; her arms were wrapped around his neck and her fingers plunging into the downy curls that covered his head.

The kiss that had started out as a shy exploration of teenage romance, was now a passionate moment between a man and a woman.

She tilted her head in the other direction to get a better angle and Peeta moaned into her mouth. My God, she thought, is this what love feels like? Her heart had been beating a mile a minute. Her insides were burning hotter than she could imagine. The flames, she had seen on the television screen earlier in the evening, flashed in her mind. She truly was a girl on fire.

As Peeta lowered her back down to the ground, she felt her body slide down his. The kiss was ending, though she didn't want it to. She wanted to throw him down to the ground and do this all night long. With that thought, Katniss instantly heard Effie's voice in her head, "Manners!" She swiftly pushed the prissy woman from her mind and concentrated on Peeta.

His lips were swollen and puffy as he kissed Katniss. One last brush of his lips and then it was over. He pressed his forehead against hers. Their breath was coming out in little bursts of air. Katniss continued to kiss Peeta's neck...collar...chin. Soft little brushes of her lips trailing against his skin. "Katniss, you have to stop." Peeta said as he lifted his head to give her better access to the spot she was trying to reach.

"I don't want to stop," she said in a very coy tone as she continued to taunt Peeta with little pecks across his jaw line.

"Neither do I, but we have to." Peeta couldn't think straight with what she was doing. Her fingers were trailing up and down the back of his

lower spine and it drove him nuts. He reached behind him and grabbed her hands. "Stop, Katniss. Please," he begged as gently as he could.

Katniss pulled back and looked into his face, "Why?"

"Because..." He took a cleansing breath. "We just have to. That's all."

Katniss could feel the pulse pounding in her neck and the blood pumping through her veins. She began to rub the tip of her nose back and forth against Peeta's.

"You're driving me crazy." He breathed against her lips.

Katniss felt as though she was going to crawl out of her skin. She ran her hands up Peeta's arms and rested them on his shoulders. She leaned her head against his chin and took a few cleansing breaths.

They stood that way for several minutes allowing the chill of the night air cool them down.

Once Katniss composed herself, she said, "You're right. We need to stop this before we do something we'll regret."

Peeta grinned down at her and said, "What gives you the idea that I'd have any regrets?" It wasn't often that he saw Katniss blush, but when she did, he found it to be very becoming. "Come on. It's cold out here and we should get some sleep." He walked Katniss to her room and went into his with a smile plastered on his face. The smile immediately disappeared when he noticed the guest that was sitting in his room awaiting his arrival.

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were Chapter 7: Training, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Seven: Training

OMG! This chapter is so loooooooooong! It took me forever to write it and read it and re-write it and re-read it and so on and so on... so I was wondering if anyone out there would like to be a beta reader for me. YES I'm IN NEED OF A BETA! My grammar is horrendous, so if you're interested and have the time, please PM me. All I need is for someone to correct my spelling and grammar. I'm not looking for story ideas, or plot twists or

anything like that, because I already know how this whole thing is going to play out. I just have to finish writing it. But it would go a lot faster if someone else could check my work. So if anyone out there is interested in getting the first drafts of my chapters...HINT HINT HINT!

In this chapter there is so so so much info, but all of it is important to the tale. ENJOY!

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

"Thought I told you to go to bed." Haymitch glared at Peeta and took a swig from his flask.

"Thought the grownups were talking?" Peeta countered and sat at the edge of his bed.

"We were. Now we're done." Haymitch pulled up a chair and sat across from Peeta. "Cinna says you're in. Are you?" Their conversation had to be somewhat cryptic so the Capitol couldn't get the gist of Haymitch's plan.

"Yup," Peeta understood his meaning.

"Good." Haymitch took another swig from his flask and said, "All right...Tell me about Katniss."

"What do you want to know?" Peeta put his elbows on his knees and rested his chin on his folded hands.

"Everything."

"She's from the Seam." The Seam was the poorest part of District 12. Peeta had lived in an area known as Town, where the merchants worked. They had shops there. Peeta's family owned the bakery and

lived above it. Katniss and Peeta had grown up in two completely different worlds. In the Seam the most common cause of death was starvation. Being from town Peeta usually had food on the table, it was stale and minimal, but he ate at least twice a day. People from town didn't really starve, but they did die of sickness often enough.

"Her father died in an explosion at the mines when she was eleven years old. Since then she's pretty much been the provider for her family." Peeta continued.

"What about her mother? Couldn't she take care of them?" Asked Haymitch.

"Katniss said her mother kind of...checked out after her father's death. Got really depressed or something. She's doesn't like to talk about her dad much. I can tell you she's still pretty angry with her mother though. Her mom's better now, but Katniss hasn't forgiven her. Her mom's a healer. People all around the district go to her when the doctor can't help. My dad knew her when she was younger. I guess her mom grew up in town, but left to marry Katniss' dad."

Haymitch knew Katniss' mother back when the Peacekeepers used to whip people on a daily basis. District 12 had been a lot different when he was younger. He nodded at Peeta urging him to go on.

"After Katniss' dad died, she had to figure out a way to feed her family so she started..." Peeta looked around the room, realizing that the Capitol was listening to them. He didn't want to get Katniss in trouble for hunting illegally. "...uh...she got food for them. You know...took care of them."

"At the age of eleven?" Haymitch wondered how a child could do that. "How did a kid accomplish something like that?"

Peeta glanced around the room and gave Haymitch a look that said, 'Not here!'

"It's okay, boy. They're going to put two and two together." Haymitch reassured him.

Peeta sighed and whispered under his breath, "She hunted for game and when she was twelve she signed up for the tesserae."

Haymitch nodded and found a deep admiration for the girl that braved the woods and broke the law, at such a young age, to hunt for her family's survival.

"After that she sort of built up this tough exterior. The thing is...when she was younger she used to smile a lot. She'd sing all the time when we were in school, but she stopped after her dad died." He paused. "She changed after he passed away. It's like a part of her died with him." Peeta's face turned remorseful. "And...you see..." He sighed. He needed to get Haymitch to understand Katniss and why she acted the way she did... "Look...I know she seems kind of cold at times, but she's not. Katniss...she's got a soft spot for kind souls....for people in need. And the folks in the district really respect her." Haymitch knew this fact to be true. All of the people in the Hob thought highly of the girl. "She's tough, but not overly pushy or anything. She's kind of a loner, but that's because she wants to be. Everybody in school thinks she's got guts. They all want to talk to her...to get to know her, but they're afraid to. She's a bit intimidating."

"You talk to her."

"I'm not afraid of her."

"So what do you friends think of that?"

"They don't know about us."

Haymitch gave him a questioning look.

Peeta corrected himself. "Well...two people do, but that's it. Everyone else has no clue."

"You mean to tell me, that no one in school knows about you two?" Haymitch was relieved to find out that not many people knew about Katniss and Peeta.

"No. No one in the entire district knows we talk to each other. Like I said, only two people know and they're not going to say anything."

"Who are these two people?"

"A friend of mine Delly Cartwright and a girl Katniss knows, Madge Undersee."

"Undersee?" The name sounded familiar to Haymitch. "The mayor's daughter?" The image of a girl from Haymitch's own Hunger Games entered his mind. Since the thought made him want to drink himself into oblivion, he pushed it out of his head.

"Yeah, Madge and Katniss used to eat lunch together all the time. No one really talked to Madge because she's the mayor's daughter and all and like I said, Katniss is kind of..." Peeta just shrugged his shoulders.

"So those are the only two people that know you two have struck up a...friendship."

Peeta gave Haymitch a questionable look and said, "I wouldn't exactly call it a friendship, but yeah."

"Does she know you're in love with her?"

"No." Peeta wished he had told her when they were in the woods the morning of the reaping, but he had been afraid.

"Has she said she's in love with you?"

"No." Peeta knew there was no way Katniss would ever be the first to admit something like that to him.

"How often do you two see each other?"

"Not very. Just lunch at school or if I make a delivery we try to meet up, but it's not often."

"And when you do see each other, what do you do?"

Peeta wasn't about to tell anyone the intimate details of his and Katniss' relationship, even if they had only shared a few kisses. They were private moments between him and Katniss. "We talk about stuff."

"Talk? That's it?"

"Yes" Peeta glared at him. "That's it!"

Haymitch held his hands up and said, "Okay. So you're sure nobody else knows other than your two friends?"

"Yeah...well...my dad knows that I've been crazy about her my whole life, but he doesn't know that we've started anything. Some of my friends know I've had a crush on her, but they just give me grief about it. Actually, people assume that Gale's her boyfriend." Peeta looked at Haymitch and asked, "Why? What's the big deal?"

"I just think you should keep it to yourself a little while longer, that's it. Keep your feelings under wraps for a bit and at the right moment...let's say...a day or ..." Haymitch counted in his head how many days until the tributes live television interviews would be aired. "...maybe four days or so...before letting her know that you love her. I mean...it must be tough for you talking to her this whole time...being her friend and secretly being in love with her?" Haymitch looked at Peeta, trying his hardest to get him to understand his meaning. "You must be suffering inside, boy. Loving a girl like that and her not having the slightest clue." Haymitch put his hand on Peeta's shoulder and looked into his eyes. "Facing the Games like this and not being able to express your love for each other...I can't even imagine what the people of this city would do if they found out about a thing like that."

It was as though Peeta could suddenly read Haymitch's mind. Like they shared the same brain. Two kids that hadn't had a chance to express their love for one another would definitely get the attention of sponsors. "Yes, it's been very hard on me, Haymitch, but just being next to her is worth it. Just being here with her is enough."

Haymitch got a glint in his eye and nodded his head. Then suddenly he said, "Who the hell is Gale?"

Peeta chuckled and said, "Her best friend."

"Of course her best friend is a boy?"

"Right?" He had a look of jealousy in his eyes.

"I take it you're not a fan of Gale?"

"Not really."

"Is there anything...funny going on between them?" Haymitch needed to know if this other guy was going to be a problem.

"She says no, but I think he's got feelings for her."

"But she doesn't have any for him, right?"

"Not according to her."

"Do you believe her?"

Peeta thought about the kiss they had just shared on the roof. He looked down at his hands and said, "Yeah. I believe her."

"Good. I'm not sure how we're going to explain him, but..."

Peeta started laughing to himself, "I actually thought they were related to each other for the longest time."

"Why?"

"They look a lot alike."

"Hmmm...maybe they are related? You never know, boy." Haymitch liked this idea. He stored it in the back of his mind just in case he needed to use it later.

It had been a long day and Peeta was exhausted. "Listen Haymitch, I'm kind of tired. If that's all for today..."

"Yeah. Sure. Sure." Haymitch stood up and took another swig out of his flask which was almost empty. He really liked this kid. He hated the fact that when he bid him goodbye in a few days, it would be the end of him. What he couldn't understand was why he was so willing to die for Katniss. He was just a kid. What did he know about love? As

Haymitch walked out of the room he turned and said, "Hey, kid...you sure about this?"

"About what?" Peeta didn't know what Haymitch was talking about.

"The arena. Katniss."

Peeta knew that Haymitch was asking him if he was sure he was willing to die for her.

Peeta looked down at the ground between his feet. "Yes I am." When he faced Haymitch he didn't bat an eye. "I'm very much in love with her, so there's really no point in me winning. My life has no purpose without her."

Haymitch was impressed with the boy. He had mentored a few of the merchant's kids in the past, but none of them had ever had this kind of inner strength or determination before. Haymitch would've given his own life to save both of these tributes. This thought instantly worried him. He knew he was in trouble. For the first time since he left his own arena, he found himself truly caring about the well-being of other human beings. He tried to push these new emotions to the back of his mind, but it wasn't working and his flask he was suckling at, was now dry. "Well, goodnight, kid. And remember...let's keep you and Katniss to ourselves for the time being."

"Sure thing." Peeta's eyes filled with panic. He had remembered something from earlier in the day. "Haymitch! Wait!" Peeta stood up and said, "District 2...They saw Katniss kiss me after the Tribute Parade."

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Nightmares invaded his sleep. Nightmares of her death. Visions of a knife plunging through her heart. Of a spear being plunged through her throat. A brick smashing her skull. He had seen Katniss die in so many ways during the course of the night. A lifetime of viewing the Games on television provided him with the scenarios. Gale woke up in a pool of cold sweat. He took in his surroundings. A dark bedroom. A pair of tiny feet, belonging to his brother, was tucked under his leg. His other brothers were asleep in the bed next to them. They looked peaceful. He ran his fingers through his brother's hair and slowly removed himself from the bed. He needed to get some air. As he walked down the hall he opened his sister's bedroom and peeked inside. She too was asleep and curled up with a doll, a ratty, stuffed piece of material with mismatched pieces of yarn sticking out of the top as its hair. When he went into the kitchen he was surprised to see his mother making a pot of tea.

"Hey. What're you doing up?"

"Heard you making some noise. Thought you could use some tea." His mother, Hazelle, had been widowed and left with four children and one on the way many years earlier, but she had taken it in stride. Even though she was due to have a baby any day she still took in other people's laundry and tried to make a living to support her family. She gave birth to a baby boy a week after becoming a widow and a week after that started to work. Gale admired his mother's strength. In a lot of ways he found Katniss to be like her.

"I didn't know I made any sounds. Sorry if I woke you."

"No need to apologize. Sit down." Said Hazelle. "Want something to eat before you head out to the woods?"

"Sure."

Hazelle went to work on some hot grain. It wasn't much, but it was something. "Want to talk about it?"

Gale didn't know what to say. It was just some nightmares. "Had a bad dream. That's all."

His mother nodded her head and said, "Is that it?"

"Yeah."

"Don't want to talk about anything else?"

"Like?"

"She's been gone for a few days now. Maybe you'd like to talk about that."

"What's there to talk about, mom? She's in the Games. I can't do much about it." But Peeta could, he thought to himself.

"No, you can't." Hazelle stopped what she was doing and turned to her son. "She might not make it back, Gale."

"Don't say that, mom."

"I don't want to say it, but it's true."

"She has to come back," he said with pain in his voice. "She has to."

Hazelle knew Gale's feelings for Katniss went further than just friendship. "Gale, I don't want anything bad to happen to Katniss either. I love her like she was my own, but I've been watching those Games my whole life and I know what can happen to even the strongest of competitors. You have to be realis..."

"Mom! You can't think like that." Gale stood up and held a hand out in front of her.

Hazelle took her son's hand in her own. "I know you want to believe she can win, but what if she doesn't?" She was trying to comfort her son, but she needed him to be realistic as well. "Gale, the odds aren't in her favor. She's going to be all alone out there."

Gale's eyes picked up and he said, "But she's not, mom. Peeta's there."

"Peeta? You mean the baker's boy? What's he got to do with this? He's going to be fighting his own battles, dear. He could care less whether or not Katniss..."

"No, mom. You don't understand." Gale was getting excited. "He promised he'd fight for her. That he'd protect her."

Hazelle had a quizzical look on her face. "You're right. I don't understand."

"He's in love with her." Gale explained the conversation he overheard between Peeta's parents and what had taken place between himself and Peeta in the Justice Building. "So you see? Peeta will make sure that she comes home."

Hazelle had been worried when it was just Katniss in the arena, now she was worried about both Peeta and Katniss. The baker's son might be able to give Katniss a hand, but most likely she would be the one protecting him. "Gale, are you certain that Katniss wasn't aware that Peeta had feelings for her?"

"Mom, Katniss would've told me if something was going on." Gale's breakfast was ready and he began to eat. All thoughts of his

nightmares were gone. In its place was hope that Katniss and Peeta were training hard and learning skills for their survival in the Games. The more Gale had thought about Peeta's feelings for Katniss, the more certain he was that she hadn't a clue about them. He had known her for years. They had shared every secret, every wish, everything in their lives. If Katniss had started a relationship with someone, especially a boy from town, Gale would've known.

Hazelle started to clean up the breakfast dishes and remembered an afternoon when Katniss had stopped by. She had dropped off a small loaf of cinnamon raisin bread for her daughter, Posy's birthday. It had been partially burnt, but it was still quite delicious. When Hazelle asked her how she got it, Katniss said it was a gift from a friend. Hazelle wondered if Peeta had been that friend. She glanced at her son as he ate his breakfast and wondered what would break his heart more. The fact that Katniss might be dead in a couple of weeks or that she might be in love with Peeta.

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Peeta woke up in a bit of a foul mood. It wasn't often that he felt that way, but there was a lot going through his mind. He needed to talk to somebody, but he usually talked things out with Katniss. Since that wasn't an option, he had to keep it to himself.

His sleep was full of dreams. His mother had been in the arena. An abandoned city, full of rubble. Peeta had taken up refuge in an old building. The pair from District 2 was searching for him and Katniss. He could hear his mother's voice behind him. "Peeta. You stupid child! I told you to be careful with the bread!" He felt the wooden mixing spoon hit his face with such force, his head turned around. He wanted to plead with her to stop, but he couldn't speak. "Throw it to the pigs!

No one will buy that!" He had burnt two loaves of bread. He wanted to tell his mother to stop screaming. District 2 might hear her and come to kill him, but he couldn't move. Couldn't speak. He was paralyzed. "I said GO!" Just then he heard the footsteps that meant his impending death. "Kill him. He's useless to me." His mother stood there as the boy and girl from District 2 started towards him. She laughed and said, "Pathetic, stupid child. You always were useless."

In the background he heard Katniss calling his name. "Peeta? Peeta where are you?"

Peeta was frozen in place. District 2 looked out the window of the building and said, "There she is. Go get her." The girl from 2 ran and the next thing Peeta knew, Katniss was lying by his side. The boy from District 2 was about to drop a giant rock on his head.

"Peeta, I thought you were going to protect me. You promised to protect me." Katniss' voice cried out, but he couldn't see her. His mother's laughter echoed through the empty building. The giant boulder was about to crush Peeta's skull when he suddenly sat straight up in bed.

His heart was racing. His eyes darted around the room. He could still hear his mother's voice echoing through his head. She haunted him on a daily basis back home.

Dying in the arena was less terrifying than his mother's beatings. At least his death would be swift, he hoped. Once he was dead...that was it. Everything would be over. His mother's abuse was never ending. She would hit him, say she was sorry, blame him for it, and then do it again. Sometimes the next day. Sometimes it would be a week later. Peeta never knew when the rage would come, but he always knew it would be there. His brothers were never on the receiving end of her anger. They would get yelled at, but she never

lifted a hand to them. They'd even take the blame for things to try and protect him, but that never worked. Even if they did do something wrong, Peeta got the blame and ultimately the punishment.

He had missed school for an entire week once because she had beaten him so badly, he couldn't walk. His father had to bring him to the doctor. When the doctor asked what had happened to Peeta's leg, his dad said, Peeta had fallen down the stairs. It was partially true. His mother had smacked him so hard; Peeta had fallen down the stairs and fractured his ankle. Peeta was ten at the time. It was then that he realized his father was never going to stand up to his mother. He wondered if his mother had ever lifted a hand to his father too. If she hadn't physically hit him, her words more than made up for it. Verbal abuse could be just as bad.

Peeta needed to get his mother out of his head so he stepped into the shower. He hadn't yet figured them out and wasn't too pleased when he walked out of it smelling like a bouquet of flowers.

He and Haymitch had talked late into the night, so Peeta was surprised to see his mentor sitting on his bed with an article of clothing.

"Miss me?" Peeta asked, attempting to sound bright.

"Training day. I want you to suggest you do it together."

"Katniss won't want to. She wants us to keep our distance around the other tributes."

"That's why you're going to suggest you do it together."

Peeta was still in a sour mood, but he didn't want to take it out on anyone, so he just agreed. "No problem. Is that what I'm wearing?" He gestured to the garments Haymitch was holding, with his chin.

"Yeah. Put these on. I'll wait here."

Peeta went into the bathroom and got dressed. He thought about last night's conversation between himself and his mentor. Haymitch's instructions were pretty simple, if you considered trying to kill off over twenty other people simple. They had to work on a plan regarding the Careers. Peeta was to report back to Haymitch on their strengths and weaknesses during the training sessions each day. Getting rid of them in the arena was going to be difficult, but they were determined to figure out a way. Haymitch had a one on one session scheduled with Katniss before the interviews so he'd try and help her out in regards to that. In the meantime Peeta could try to work with her too, but only when they were in the wind chime garden. Peeta had to keep Katniss at arm's length in public, which wouldn't be hard; she had wanted him to do that since they'd entered the Games. Haymitch's reasoning was that he wanted them to look like friends, not lovers. Peeta argued with Haymitch telling him they weren't lovers, but in the end it was easier to just do what his mentor wanted. There was to be no more intimacy between the pair. That drove Peeta nuts. He had to keep his distance. No hand holding. No hugs. And no kissing. Peeta had to take the unrequited love thing seriously. Well, he thought, I had eleven years of practice, so I should be a pro at it. He looked at himself in the mirror and remembered last night's kiss between him and Katniss, thinking, I'll remember that kiss for the rest of my life...my short life. Haymitch wasn't pleased with the fact that District 2 saw Katniss kiss him after the Tribute Parade, but they still had time to try and figure out how to put a spin on it.

He and Haymitch walked to the dining room for breakfast. "So why am I suggesting we train together? She'll just get mad at me if I do that." Peeta wondered.

"Friends in public, remember?"

"I'm not sure if she'll want to do that." Peeta and Haymitch looked down the hall and saw the object of their discussion dunking bits of a roll into a cup. "But you're the mentor. Let's go."

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Effie knocked lightly on Peeta's bedroom door at Haymitch's request. "I'm no good at these things, Effie," whined Haymitch. "And those two kids have to be a happy pair when they go downstairs. Not a couple of bickering tributes. Go fix it." She wasn't thrilled with having to get in the middle of Katniss and Peeta's little breakfast spat, but it was her job after all.

"Oh, hi Effie. Is it 10:00 already? Am I late?" Peeta turned to look at the clock.

"No. No. Not at all. May I come in?" She asked.

"Sure."

Effie closed the door behind her and sat as far away from Peeta's bed as possible. Being in a male tribute's bedroom was not appropriate behavior as far as Effie was concerned and it made her feel very uncomfortable. "Peeta, I'd like to discuss something with you."

Peeta assumed she had more instructions for him so he sat across from her with open ears.

"I'd like to talk about your conduct over breakfast this morning."

Peeta closed his eyes and immediately felt remorse. "I'm sorry, Effie." He couldn't believe what he had done, himself. "I shouldn't have acted that way. I apologize."

"Well...yes, it was poor manners, but..." Effie thought for a moment about what he had said. Had his mother really thought that Katniss would win the Games and not her own son? She felt a pang of sorrow in the pit of her stomach for the young man. "I thought that perhaps...maybe... Would you'd like to talk about it?"

"There's really nothing to talk about, Effie. I was rude to Katniss and I'll apologize to her as soon as I see her." Peeta regretted telling Katniss his mother's words about her being a survivor.

Peeta had made a vow to himself the first time he lied to Katniss about the beating he had taken from his mother. He would never tell her about that part of his life. Never tell Katniss about the physical abuse. Never let her know that he lived the majority of his life in fear. He'd never share the mental anguish he'd been through or repeat the names his mother had called him over the years. Those words were for his ears alone. Repeating them to Katniss would be like subjecting her to his mother's abuse too. And Peeta wouldn't allow that. He could never do that to Katniss...until today, he thought to himself.

Peeta covered his head with his hands and said, "I'm sorry. So sorry. Why did I say that to her? I shouldn't have told her what my mother said. Why did I tell her that?"

Effie's heart ached as she watched Peeta suffer. Over the years she had seen many tributes cry for their parents or out of fear, but never over the welfare of a fellow tribute. Effie looked around the room wishing that Haymitch hadn't sent her into Peeta's room to remedy the

situation. She wasn't exactly the motherly type, she thought to herself, but she'd try. She placed her hand on Peeta's shoulder and gave it a couple of pats. "There. There. I'm sure Katniss has forgotten all about it by now," she said in an encouraging tone. "She's probably flattered by your mother's comment."

Peeta pitied Effie and her pathetic attempt at consoling him. Still he knew he couldn't let last night's dream about his mother effect the outcome of his training day. He lifted up his face and dried his eyes. He smiled at his escort and said, "She probably is flattered, Effie. Thanks." He walked into the bathroom and thought, Effie, you're clueless, but for some strange reason, I like you. He washed all vestiges of tears out of his eyes and told Effie he'd meet her by the elevator. A few minutes later all thoughts of his mother were gone and he was ready to get on with his day.

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Katniss and Peeta listened to Atala, the woman in charge of all of the tributes while they were in training for the next three days. She was instructing them not to engage in battle with each other, telling them about each training station, but no one was really listening. Everyone was too busy eyeing up their competition.

Katniss couldn't help but notice how almost everyone in the room was bigger than she was and Peeta couldn't help but notice the stares they were getting from District 2. For some reason he had decided not to avert his eyes away from their looks. He just glared straight back at them with a catty smile plastered on his face, winked at them and turned away. Let them think about that for a little while, he thought to himself. In that split second he had decided to give the Careers a target other than Katniss. It was the only thing he could think of, and

he hoped it would work. The one thing he did know was that Katniss was right; they couldn't show any of these people fear. They would pounce on it.

When Atala finished speaking, Katniss and Peeta stayed put. Neither one of them said a word. They just looked around the room at the different training stations.

Peeta knew he had to apologize to Katniss about what had happened over breakfast that morning. "I was surprised you wanted to train together."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"I don't know. You've wanted us to keep our distance around the other tributes." Peeta stared at the Careers, taking mental notes, and watched as the boy from District 4 started to do some hand to hand combat with one of the assistants the Capitol had provided as a sparring partner.

"It's training, Peeta. Like you said earlier...it's not like we've got secrets from one another." Katniss' eyes followed Peeta's.

"Yeah...about earlier." Peeta turned and faced her. "I'm sorry about that. I kind of woke up on the wrong side of the bed and took it out on you. I didn't mean to."

"It's okay." She was still staring at the boy from District 4. She couldn't help but worry about the giant kid that was currently throwing the Capitol attendant around like he was a wet rag. She hoped that someone killed him before he could get to her.

Peeta nudged her with his elbow and said, "Hey. Where would you like to go?"

Katniss pulled herself out of her stupor. She remembered Haymitch's instructions over breakfast.

Haymitch had told both Peeta and Katniss not to show off their skills during training. Katniss was proficient with a bow and arrow, so it was imperative that she stay away from that area and since Peeta had worked in the bakery his whole life, he spent many days throwing heavy sacks of flour around so he was told to stay away from the weights.

"Suppose we go tie some knots."

"Right you are," he said.

They learned a few basic snares, which Katniss was already pretty good at.

"Done this before, Katniss?" Peeta looked down at her.

"Yeah. Gale taught me how to set this type of snare when I was...thirteen I think." She showed Peeta how to do it.

"So what do you do after you set the snare?" He asked.

"I kind of have this routine I follow." She looked around them to make sure no one was listening and said quietly. "Whenever I set my snares I always go west and spend the day gathering."

"Why not east?"

"I follow the sun." She looked at Peeta. "The sun rises in the east and sets in the west. Then I don't get lost."

Peeta lifted the corner of his mouth in a grin and said, "That's pretty smart."

"If you find my snares in the arena Peeta, all you'll have to do is go west and you'll run smack into me."

"I'll remember that."

As the day progressed Katniss noticed Peeta's eyes constantly flickering to the camouflage area. "Why don't we go there next?" Katniss fought hard to keep a straight face as Peeta smiled.

"Sounds good."

Katniss watched as Peeta's eyes seemed to take on a distant, transfixed look about them once he began mixing the ingredients together, but her attentions were quickly diverted when she saw something shiny flash in the corner of her eye.

The monster of a boy from District 2 threw a spear through a dummy's heart from fifteen yards away. She couldn't help but stare at the scene to the side of her. The boy from District 2 seemed to be slaughtering dummy after dummy with the spears and the girl from the same district was doing just as much damage to her targets with her knives. Everything she took aim at she hit.

When Katniss was finally able to pull her focus back to Peeta she was in awe. Mud, berry juice and bits of clay were mixed together around his skin. His arm and hand, which had been there just moments ago, was gone and in its place was the bark of a tree. "Oh my God, Peeta. How did you do that?"

He lifted his bark covered arm up and wiggled his fingers around then placed it against the stump of a tree to have it completely blend into the scenery. "Told you I loved art, but I learned this from doing the cakes at the bakery."

"I knew you did the cakes, but...this is amazing. I've never seen a cake like that in the window."

"I've never made a cake out of mud and clay before," he laughed.

"Don't forget the berry juice," said the trainer.

"Oh yeah. The berry juice," said, Peeta.

"I'll have to take you to the woods when we get home so you can make me a mud cake for me." Katniss' smile matched Peeta's.

In the span of a second Peeta, Katniss and their trainer remembered where they were. The smiles that were on all three of their faces dropped. The trainer told Peeta where he could wash up. Katniss said she'd wait for him and Peeta just nodded his head in agreement.

In the back of Katniss' mind she couldn't help but hear Effie Trinket's voice saying, "Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds be ever in your favor!"

Katniss glared around the room taking in all of her competition. She looked at the crippled boy from District 10 and knew she wouldn't be the one that would kill him. She looked at a redheaded girl and found her eyes to be a bit shifty. Then she noticed a fight breaking out between the boy from District 2 and another tribute. She moved a little closer to try and see what was happening. She overheard the boy from 2 accusing the other boy of stealing his knife. They appeared to be getting into a heated argument and just as Katniss began to divert her eyes she saw her...the little girl from District 11 was in a net on the ceiling, smiling...playing with the very knife District 2 thought had been plundered. Katniss couldn't help but smile to herself. She hid her grin behind her fingers and took a breath. She had to shake off the past few minute's events. District 11 helped her whether she knew it or not.

Katniss couldn't afford to dwell on Peeta's death while they were in training. She needed to keep focused. She and Peeta still had a little bit of time together. While they were in training they'd have to keep a lid on their feelings, but once training was over for the day, they could spend a few minutes together on the roof...she hoped.

Lunch was harder than it sounded. Katniss could feel eyes on them from every direction. They were the only two that ate together other than the Careers. All the other tributes sat by themselves and it made Katniss feel uncomfortable. "Maybe we should've trained separately, Peeta. This is awkward."

"What's awkward?"

"This..." She made a motion with her head gesturing towards the other tributes.

"Katniss don't be silly. We eat lunch together all the time."

"This isn't exactly the oak tree and these people aren't Delly and Madge."

Peeta looked across at Katniss and studied her worried expression. "Who cares where we are? We've never had a problem talking during lunch before."

"Fine. Talk then." Katniss spit out. Her face was like stone.

Peeta looked around the room and noticed the Careers glaring at them again. He thought of lunches with Katniss. All of their conversations usually concluded with some form of intimacy and that was not going to play out well here. He needed to keep his distance. Once again he was staring back at the Careers. No fear, he told himself. He smirked at them and gave them a tilt of his head, as

though he was saying...and how are you today? He turned his attention to Katniss who was picking at a loaf of bread and he said, "It's from District 1."

"Huh?"

"The bread. It's from District 1. See all the little sprinkles of crystals on top? It's sugar. That's what makes it so sweet." He dumped out the basket of bread onto the table. "The Capitol put bread from every district in here to make us feel at home. The one you're picking at is from District 1. I already ate the one from District 2. It wasn't very good. District 3 is...right here. They're tiny little things aren't they? District 4 is shaped like a fish and tinted green on the bottom...you know...for the seaweed," Peeta went on and on describing each of the districts. "District 11 has these tiny little seeds on top because they're agriculture and...well you know our bread." He scooped them up and put them back into the basket. "My favorite is from District 7. It's got maple syrup in it. Who would've thought that the lumber district would be my favorite bread, but..." he shrugged his shoulders. "Okay. Now it's your turn. You talk."

"I don't know what to say." Katniss started to bite at one of her nails.

"Seriously, Katniss? Have we really run out of things to talk about already?"

Katniss looked to the side and noticed the sly redheaded girl sitting about three yards away from them. "It's hard to talk here, Peeta."

Peeta looked around and said, "No it's not. We eat here every day, Katniss."

She squinted her eyes and gave him a look like he was crazy.

Peeta pushed their table to the side and said, "This is our oak tree and behind you...those aren't tributes, those are the clusters of trees that the mockingjays nest in."

"Nice try, Peeta." Katniss rolled her eyes.

"Close your eyes, Katniss." She stared at him. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"Then close your eyes." He insisted.

It took her a few seconds, but she finally closed her eyes and when she did all she could hear was the sound of the occasional chair scraping or a Career laughing in the background. Then she heard the calming sound of Peeta's voice.

"We're sitting in District 12 right now." He paused between almost every phrase. "It's lunchtime. Delly is talking Madge's ear off and Madge is about ready to leave...as usual. There's a bit of a breeze out today, but it's refreshing. The sun is warm, but we're in the shade under the oak tree. Can you hear the birds chirping in the background, Katniss? The mockingjays are quiet today, but the robins are whistling away. I can hear the sound of the leaves when the wind blows. In the distance I can hear the other kids at school. They're laughing...talking. I can smell the coal from the mine, can you smell it?"

"No." She answered quietly.

"What do you smell?"

"Cinnamon and dill...you."

Peeta tried not to smile, but he couldn't help it. "I smell like cinnamon and dill?"

"Yes."

"Open your eyes, Katniss. Talk to me."

Katniss was no longer in a room full of tributes, but having lunch by the oak tree with Peeta. "Did I ever tell you about the time I was chased by a bear?"

Peeta's eyebrows shot straight up. "No, but it sounds fascinating."

"According to my mother, it was foolish."

Peeta laughed and said, "Tell me the story and I'll decide if it was foolish or fascinating."

"Good. I wouldn't mind another opinion," she said with a cheeky grin. "Personally, I thought I was brilliant, but I'll leave it up to you. I had been in the woods late one afternoon..."

"Was Gale with you?"

"No. Why?"

"Just trying to get a picture in my head."

"Oh. Well I was walking home from the lake and on my way back I thought I saw some pheasants in a tree up ahead so I threw a few stones into the branches, but it's hard throwing stones and shooting arrows at the same time, especially with a full game bag, so I had to chase them. When I did, I found myself in a different area of the woods than I normally go to."

"Had you been there before?"

"A couple of times, but only with Gale. It's pretty thick with brush and trees...it's just better to go with a hunting partner. But I was pretty determined that day."

"Those birds pissed you off didn't they?" Peeta asked with a knowing grin.

Katniss glared at him in good humor, "Yes. However, I took aim, shot one arrow into the tree just high enough to get the birds going then shot three more arrows at the birds taking them down one after the other."

"So where does the bear come in?" Peeta was getting anxious.

"I'm getting to it." Katniss chuckled. "After I had gathered my game. I climbed the tree to get my arrow and as I was headed down I noticed something below me, but on the ground and to the right. I looked over my shoulder and I see this huge bear staring up at the tree I'm in."

"Oh my God. Were you frightened?"

"Not really. To be honest, I was trying to figure out how many of my arrows it would take to bring him down."

Peeta had a look of shock on his face. "You wanted to kill him?"

"Sure. Why not?" She shrugged. "Then I realized I'd never be able to carry him by myself, so... That's when I figured out he wasn't looking at me. He was looking at something else. There was a beehive about ten feet above my head and I had completely missed it."

"Thank God. Those bees could've killed you."

"They weren't in there."

"Where were they?"

"Don't know." She shrugged. "But I do know there was honey in it."

"And how do you know that, Katniss?" Peeta asked accusingly.

"Because I climbed back up the tree, only this time I scampered behind it so the bear wouldn't see me. I knew I'd have to figure out a way of getting that hive down and escaping that bear, but I couldn't outrun a bear, right?"

"Right." Peeta was hanging on the edge of his seat.

"So this was my plan. If I could get the honeycomb out of the hive, that would give me some honey and I'd still leave the bear some honey too. I'd drop the hive down on the ground for him and I'd hop over to the next tree and climb down, then take off for the fence and run for my life."

"Did it work?"

"Nope."

"Oh my God, Katniss! You're killing me here! What happened?"

Katniss smiled. "I stuck my hand inside of the hive and ripped out the honeycomb, not thinking about the fact that my hand would be dripping with honey and leaving a trail of the stuff for the bear to follow. Or that my hand would get stuck inside of the hive."

"Oh no!"

"Oh yes!" She laughed. "There I was, trying to smack a beehive against a tree, while a bear was getting ready to climb it. Finally the hive broke off of its branch and I climbed out onto the biggest and

closest branch I could find and made it to the next tree. Unfortunately for the bear, he outweighed me by a couple of hundred pounds and he fell to the ground." She laughed even louder. "There I was. My hand and arm dripping with honey, stuck inside of a beehive..."

"It was still on there?" Peeta couldn't help but laugh.

"Yes!"

"What about the bear?"

"He kept trying to climb the trees and the branches kept breaking. So I kept traveling along the branches, until finally I got the damn hive off of my hand and it fell to the ground. My hand was dripping with honey and the bear had finally given up on me."

Peeta was holding his stomach and laughing, picturing Katniss up in a tree, covered in honey trying to battle it out with a bear.

"I'm glad you think it's funny." She laughed.

"Katniss, you are fearless! Foolish, but fearless."

"Oh, so you do agree with my mother?"

"Yes, I think I'm going to have to side with her on this one." Peeta smiled at her. "Just do me a favor. Don't go messing around with any bears or beehives in the arena, okay?"

"And what am I supposed to do if I get a craving for some honey?" She laughed.

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After the first day of training Peeta and Katniss updated Haymitch on the day's events. When Haymitch excused them once again claiming that the adults needed to talk, they went to the rooftop garden.

Katniss felt relief when she could finally relax with Peeta, but he still seemed to be in training mode. Talking to her about their interviews. Suggesting that she talk about Prim and how it was her first reaping.

"No. I'm not bringing that up."

"Why not, Katniss?"

"I don't need to relive that again, Peeta. It's bad enough they replay it on television all the time."

Peeta wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms and ease her pain, but he could hear Haymitch's instructions in his head. No touching. No hand holding. So when Katniss reached out and took his hand in his, it nearly killed him to pull his hand away from hers. "What do you suggest you talk about then?"

"I don't know. Who cares?" Katniss was exasperated. It had been a long day and she was tired. She had tried to hold Peeta's hand three times since coming up to the rooftop, but every time she did, he had pulled away from her. Maybe, she thought, he was finally getting in the same frame of mind as she. That they needed to try to separate now, before they went into the arena. She didn't try to have any other forms of intimacy with him after that. Though she missed him terribly.

Each night before bed Peeta briefed Haymitch privately on the Careers as well as any other tribute he thought might pose as a threat in the arena. Other than a handful of players, Peeta found himself telling Haymitch about practically everyone.

On the second day of training, Peeta watched Katniss scamper up a dangling wall made of knotted ropes. While the other tributes fell halfway through the climb, including himself, she made it to the top and back down without stopping once.

Katniss was impressed when she saw Peeta pin the assistant during hand to hand combat. She knew he was a good wrestler, but after watching him pin the assistant over and over again, once in less than ten seconds, she couldn't help but think that perhaps he came in second place to his brother during the wrestling competition, on purpose.

On the third afternoon it was time to show off their skills. Katniss was finally going to be able to get her hands on a bow and arrow and Peeta was supposed to show his skills with the weights.

They sat in a room full of tributes, listening in as each one was called. First it was the boy from District 1 then the girl. One by one each tribute was called off.

Katniss and Peeta sat and waited in silence sharing the occasional nervous glance. When they were finally alone in the room, Katniss spoke. "Remember to do what Haymitch said."

"I will."

The entire room had been empty, but they were still sitting side by side. When Katniss let her hand drop down and rested it between them, Peeta slid his fingers over and touched his pinky against hers. It wasn't much, but it was enough.

Katniss' eyes closed and she took in a deep breath of air. She lifted her pinky finger and wrapped it around Peeta's.

They both stared at the wall ahead of them without blinking.

A voice from a loudspeaker called out. "Peeta Mellark."

Peeta stood up and started walking. He stopped. Turned to her with a heartwarming smile and said, "Katniss." She looked up at him. "Shoot straight."

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The training room had been void of all tributes but himself. Peeta was alone and to the right was the area where the Gamemakers had been all week long watching...taking notes...analyzing the tributes. Today their job was to essentially determine all of their worth. Peeta just hoped he could get something better than a four. The Gamemakers were going to give them a score rating each tribute between zero and twelve. The Careers usually got anywhere from an eight to the ten range and everyone else fell below that. Peeta was just hoping he wouldn't embarrass himself.

He didn't know if he was supposed to introduce himself, so he just headed for the weights. When he got there, he lifted up a thirty pound weight, spun in a circle and tossed it around. It flew pretty far, but it was only thirty pounds so it wasn't all that impressive. The next weight he picked up was sixty pounds. He hadn't gotten a good grip on the handle so it slipped out of his hand and almost landed on his foot. Great, he thought, I'll be lucky if I get a three now. Once again he let the weight fly. It didn't get as much distance as the last one, but it didn't weigh as much. He looked over at the Gamemakers to see if they were paying attention to him and noticed that there were a few of them that seemed to be watching him, so he continued. This time he picked up the one hundred pound weight. He felt the familiar feel of

the weight. "Just like a bag of flour," he whispered to himself. And he let it fly. He watched as it soared and let the corner of his mouth lift in a little grin. Just as he was about to turn to see if the Gamemakers were watching he heard them start to sing a drinking song. Peeta couldn't believe his ears. He turned around and looked at them and then turned back to the weights. He walked over and picked up the last one hundred pound weight and threw it, but not in the same direction as the rest of the weights. He threw it against the rack that held the spears about twenty five feet away.

The loud crashing noise of the weapons falling to the ground caused the Gamemakers to stop what they were doing. All of them looked to see what was causing the ruckus.

Peeta smiled politely at them and said, "Good afternoon. I'm Peeta Mellark from District 12." He stood there with his hands behind his back and waited until someone spoke to him.

Head Gamemaker, Seneca Crane exchanged approving looks with the rest of his cohorts and said, "You're dismissed."

74th Hunger Games

Challenge: We

Always Were Chapter

8: Eleven, a hunger

games fanfic |

FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Eight: Eleven!

In this chapter you'll find out how Gale's coping at home without Katniss and what he thinks of her training score. You'll also get some different POV's on her eleven score and get some other tasty bits of info. The Games are coming up soon, but first it's the interviews. I wonder what they'll say? Hmmmm... And a big thanks to my new beta, A! Yay for A!

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

Gale found his new routine a bit odd. Talking to his mother about the Games was uncomfortable. She always had a look of regret on her face. He barely spoke to Katniss' family when he brought them food, he just didn't know what to say to them. However, each morning when he went to the bakery he and the baker would strike up a conversation that seemed to help ease Gale's nerves.

"Morning, sir."

"Morning, Gale. Big day today."

"Yup. Training scores."

"Katniss should get some good scores if they've got a bow and arrow on hand."

"Well, Peeta's pretty strong; he should do well too, sir." Gale remembered Katniss mentioning that Peeta had come in second place during the wrestling competition at school.

The men encouraged each other on a daily basis while making their trades. It didn't change anything, but in a small way it helped, or that's what Gale told himself.

Gale provided the baker with three squirrels a day and the baker gave Gale a bag of something for Katniss' family as well as something for his own. Gale didn't think the trades were fair, he was sure the baker was giving more than what he was getting. Gale could understand feeding Prim and her mother, the baker had made a promise to his son, but he didn't understand why the baker had been throwing in this extra bag of bread for his own family lately. Gale felt like he owed him something more. He didn't like owing people things.

He looked at the baker and realized that the man had a lot of Peeta's features. The hair was the same color and style. His eyes were blue like Peeta's too. Gale wasn't sure about the nose as he'd never really noticed Peeta's nose before, but his face looked pretty close to the same. He wondered if the baker's family found comfort in the similarities or if seeing Peeta in the man's features bothered them. Gale didn't know, but he did know one thing. Since Katniss had left for the arena, the one person that could understand what he was going through was the baker.

"I brought a little something extra for you today. Just to say thank you." Gale handed the baker a small bowl of blackberries.

"No thanks are necessary." The man held up a hand as if to refuse the gift.

Gale insisted. "Please. Take them. You can eat them tonight to celebrate Peeta's score." Gale gave the baker a small smile.

"Thank you." The baker took the berries and said, "I'm sure we'll be celebrating both of their scores tonight. Watching it at home?"

"No. I'm going to go to the square." Gale had been making it a habit of watching the events in public so his mother wouldn't start peppering him with questions afterwards.

"Maybe I'll see you there. I was thinking about watching it there myself."

Gale gave the baker a little nod and said goodbye.

After school that afternoon, Gale went into the woods to check his snares. He grabbed the bow and arrows Katniss had given him years before and took off after a couple of rabbits he had noticed in the bushes. He may have been over six feet tall, but years of hunting had taught him how to track without making a sound. He lifted the bow and placed the arrow against the taught string. His fingers pulled back as he took aim and he let it fly. Unfortunately he hadn't been quick enough and he had missed his target by a hair.

Across the country, at that precise moment another arrow was taking flight. Katniss Everdeen took a similar position, but unlike her friend, she had hit her desired target. Her arrow skewered the apple out of the Gamemaker's roasted pig's mouth and pierced it against the wall of the Gamemaker's station.

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"Do you think it went well?" Portia asked.

"I don't know. I mean...I got their attention." Peeta told her as he took the towel off of his recently washed face.

"So, explain it to me again. They were ignoring you?"

"Sort of. I think they were drunk."

Portia sat on the edge of Peeta's bed with her legs crossed. "Did you tell Haymitch yet?"

"Not yet." Peeta pulled a clean shirt out of the dresser and began changing.

Portia started to think it over, "Maybe you should wait until he's had a glass of wine or two."

"Or five." Peeta chuckled. "It's no big deal, Portia. They weren't mad or anything. If anything I actually think it helped."

"Let's hope so." Peeta grabbed a pair of pants, but Portia said, "Not those." She stood up and pulled out a different pair. "Here. Put these on. I'll meet you out there." She rubbed Peeta's shoulder in a nonchalant gesture and left him in his room.

Peeta wasn't sure if he had made a mistake or not by throwing the weight against the spears during his session, but Haymitch said to make sure the Gamemakers remembered them and he was certain that he had left them with a lasting impression...or some sort of impression. He hadn't seen Katniss since she had gotten back from her time with them, but he knew she was superb with a bow and arrow, so there was no way they couldn't notice how great she was.

He walked out into the dining area to find out how it went, but she wasn't there. "Effie? Where's Katniss?"

"I'm not sure. She's been in her room since she got back."

Peeta had an uncomfortable feeling in his gut. "Did everything go okay?"

Effie lifted her gloved fingers as if saying, 'I haven't a clue.'

Peeta listened as the group made idle talk. He kept glancing down the hall towards Katniss' room. The more time that had passed the more he worried. Where are you, Katniss? He wondered. What happened today? When he could no longer take the suspense he went up to Effie and said, "Isn't it almost time to eat? Maybe you should tell Katniss?"

The moment he saw her emerge from her room his eyes were asking all sorts of questions. 'Are you okay? What happened out there today?' When she shook her head at him he knew things didn't go well.

He looked at her across the dinner table and something inside of him knew he had to cheer her up. He was fairly sure his session was successful, but he wasn't about to tell her that. So when Haymitch asked about it, Peeta played it off, mentioning the fact that he almost dropped a weight on his foot and that the Gamemakers started to sing a drinking song. When he saw Katniss smile, he knew he had done the right thing. He gave her a wink across the dinner table and was rewarded with a grin.

When Katniss told everyone what she had done during her session with the Gamemakers, once again Peeta had to admire her courage.

He told her not to take on anymore bears, but she had taken on an entire room full of them.

Peeta didn't know how she did it, but Katniss had made everyone sitting around their dinner table fall in love with her. Portia was sitting next to Cinna laughing in a light airy tone after Katniss told them about the Gamemaker that had fallen backwards into a punchbowl. Cinna's eyes were shining brightly at his very own girl on fire. Haymitch looked at Katniss with admiration and pride, and Effie... Effie Trinket's response came as the biggest surprise to Peeta. She too was fighting laughter as she chastised the Gamemakers for not doing their jobs and not paying attention to Katniss.

As they sat down on the sofa to watch the results of their training on television, Peeta could feel Katniss' nervous energy when she said, "I'll get a very low score."

"No you won't," Peeta's voice was hypnotic.

"How do you know?" she lifted her face to his. The moment she heard the familiar gentle tone in Peeta's voice, she knew everything would be alright. When she saw his bright blue eyes sparkling at her, giving her that look that told her how crazy he was about her, all Katniss could think about was how much she had missed him over the past few days.

"You have no clue, Katniss." He was completely lost when she looked at him. "No clue the effect you have on people." Peeta could feel her eyes penetrate his heart, like silver mirrors into his soul.

The rest of the room just looked at the pair until Haymitch cleared his throat and Effie announced that they were starting the program.

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Gale stood at the edge of town, staring at the giant screen. He was listening to Caesar Flickerman talk about the previous Games and how important the training scores were. Caesar didn't look that bad this year, thought Gale. Just then Gale felt a hand on his shoulder. It was the baker.

"Haven't started yet?" Asked the baker.

Gale shook his head and looked around for the man's wife and family. "Come alone?"

"Yup."

Gale just nodded his head. The two of them stood there waiting for the program to begin. Neither one of them said a thing until Gale asked, "How old do you think Caesar Flickerman is?"

"Don't know. He's been hosting as long as I can remember. Looks the same too. Except the hair."

"Yeah, he was crimson last year."

"Well, we can all be thankful he's blue this year," said the baker. "Here we go." The baker made a gesture to the giant television screen with his chin.

Caesar began to read off the names of the tributes, the districts they came from and their scores. The pictures of the tributes floated up on the screen.

Gale watched as the names and district identifiers were posted underneath each tribute's photo then, at the last minute, Caesar would read out a number between zero and twelve. The number would flash

onto the tribute's picture thus giving the tribute their training score for the games providing the sponsors and bookies alike, with a starting point.

Gale and the baker stood through twenty two tribute's scores. They gave each other worried looks when they saw the careers get nines and tens. When the little girl from District 11 got a seven both men gave each other an odd glance and Gale wondered what she did to get such a high score from the Gamemakers. Gale gave the baker one last fleeting look before staring at the television set. Peeta's face lit up the screen. In front of his face was the number eight. An eight. Peeta had scored almost as high as a Career.

"Eight!" Gale heard Peeta's father call out. There were cheers all around him from the residents of District 12, but Gale couldn't celebrate training scores yet. There was still one more person to go.

Gale whispered to himself, "Come on, Catnip." He used the familiar nickname he had given her many years before. Gale was sure she could get an eight like Peeta. No one could shoot a bow and arrow like Katniss.

A hush fell over the crowd. Gale could feel the tension in the air as Caesar said, "From District 12. Katniss Everdeen...Eleven."

Gale saw the number in front of Katniss' face on television. He squinted his eyes to make sure he saw correctly. He heard Caesar's words, but he didn't believe it. His first instinct was disbelief. His second was excitement. He looked around him. Everyone was cheering. The entire district was going crazy. Peeta and Katniss had just scored an eight and an eleven. An eleven!

Gale's hand flew to the top of his head and he called out, "Oh my God! What did she do? An eleven!" His face lit up with a smile. He had

turned to congratulate the baker when he noticed the look on his face. He wasn't celebrating like the rest of the people in the crowd. He was still staring at the television screen with a look of concern on his face. Gale stared at him for a moment and then realized why he appeared to be so worried. They had both wanted Katniss and Peeta to do well for training scores. They wanted them to get sponsors, but neither one of them thought about the other thing it could get them.

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Haymitch slapped Peeta on the back. "Can you believe that? An eleven? And you... What did you do to get an eight? I thought you said you just threw some weights around?" Haymitch took out his flask and took a long swallow. He dropped it to the floor when he heard the vase shatter against the wall.

Peeta stood with both hands in a fist trying his best not to punch his mentor in the face.

"What the hell, boy? What was that for? You made me spill my drink." Haymitch closed Peeta's bedroom door and walked up behind him.

"You might want to back off, Haymitch." Peeta practically growled at the man. "You may have gotten a punch in once before, but I promise you, you won't this time."

Haymitch stepped back and said carefully, "What seems to be the problem here, kid? You two did great."

Peeta turned to face him and glared. "I have just spent the past few days trying to make myself the target of the Careers. Trying to make them watch me in that training center, not some...petite little girl. Hell,

Cinna and Portia set us both on fire, right? We were both in that damn parade! And now she's got an eleven. An eleven!" Peeta turned and punched the wall. "Who do you think they're going to go after the second that gong sounds? Not the guy that got an eight!"

Haymitch's eyes picked up. He should've known that right away, he thought to himself. "Yeah, but Peeta, with an eleven the sponsors..."

"Forget the sponsors. Everyone knows the first people to go are the highest scoring tributes. There won't be anyone to sponsor!" The look on Peeta's face brought Haymitch to his senses.

"We'll need to work out a plan."

"Well we've got tonight and tomorrow to figure out what to do."

"We've got tonight. Effie and I will be training you two together on...?"

"Not anymore," Peeta interrupted him.

"What?"

"We're not training together anymore." Peeta informed him. "If we're going to work out a plan, then we'll need time and if she's training with me, we won't have any, so..." Peeta shook his head in disgust. "Damn it!" He called out. "I hate this!" He was frustrated with the entire situation. He looked around his room and tried to pull himself together. "Give me a minute will you, Haymitch."

Peeta went into his bathroom and threw some water on his face. He placed his hands on the edge of the sink and stared at his reflection in the mirror. He hated District 12. No, he thought, he hated the life the Capitol forced upon all of them in District 12. The starvation, the fear, the Games. He closed his eyes and thought of Katniss. She didn't

smile too often. When she walked around school she always had a stoic expression on her face, but Peeta could usually soften that look up during lunch. He loved her hair. He would wrap her braid around his hand at times and pull her head down to his so he could whisper in her ear, and then he'd kiss her on her cheek. He'd breathe her in. Breathe in her scent. She smelled like pine and fresh air. Like he imagined the woods would smell. When he mentioned to her that he liked rabbits better than squirrel, she would bring rabbit for lunch. When he said he didn't feel right taking food from her, she told him that she just shot extra game for them, so he wasn't taking anything from anybody. She was so generous. So giving. She shot at the Gamemakers, he laughed to himself. No, if she had shot at the Gamemakers, they'd be dead. She shot at the apple in that stupid roasted pig's mouth. He looked in the mirror and said, "That's why you love her." He smacked the bathroom counter. Dried off his face and reminded himself. "You can do this, Peeta. For Katniss."

Peeta walked back into his bedroom feeling like himself again and told Haymitch, "We're going to have to come up with a strategy for the arena tonight. As far as the interview goes, we'll stay on schedule and work on those tomorrow. I'm pretty sure I'll be fine with them, but just in case I need a few pointers..."

"I'll let Effie know." Haymitch left the room and Peeta started cleaning up the broken pieces of crystal that he had thrown against the wall.

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Katniss couldn't believe it. She had scored an eleven. Everyone seemed so happy for her except for Peeta. She didn't understand it. He wanted her to win. He kept telling her that she needed to go home. Katniss lied in bed thinking about him. He had scored an eight. She

was so proud of him. He said he threw some things around the room, but she knew he had to have done something more than that and she wondered for a brief second what that little girl from District 11 did to get a seven. She was no bigger than Prim. She pictured the small child, hiding in the net on the ceiling of the training center, playing with District 2's knife. It brought images of Prim to Katniss' mind so she pushed them away. Once again she thought of Peeta. Why was it when he congratulated her tonight, she felt like it was insincere? She knew him well enough to know when he was lying. The smile he gave her tonight wasn't genuine. It wasn't a smile that said, 'good for you or I'm happy for you.' Was he finally coming to grips with his own death? She wondered. Peeta's death was something Katniss didn't even want to face, so she could understand how it would be painful for him. She rolled to her side and pulled a pillow into her arms, wishing it were Peeta. She was tempted to walk down the hallway and knock on his door.

She lay that way for several minutes until finally she picked up the remote control that was sitting on the nightstand next to her bed. When she touched it a scene filled up the large picture window on her bedroom wall. An image of the Capitol at night filled her room, but she didn't want to see that, so she touched the remote again. The next image was of the sea. The waves were splashing against rocks and sand. Katniss continued to go through image after image, deserts, trees that reminded her of the woods, flatlands that had a large mountain in the distance and then she sat straight up in bed. She saw something familiar on the screen. It looked like...home. It wasn't, but it resembled it. There were a few stone cottages that were familiar to Katniss. She saw smoke coming out of the chimneys on the screen and behind the houses was the forest, but the fence was missing. Katniss knew what the actual scene looked like in District 12. The charming cottages that the Capitol had on the screen were actually barren and deserted. Behind it was the woods, but there was a large

fence with warning signs posted on them, telling the residents to keep out and that they would be killed if they didn't.

Katniss walked closer to the screen and put her hand two inches away from the center house. She remembered that morning as though it were yesterday. Peeta had asked her if she could meet him there. His father asked him to make a delivery to the Peacekeepers and Peeta had been able to sneak away for a few minutes. They had arranged to meet in the center cottage. Away from viewing eyes.

Katniss was supposed to meet Gale like she did every Sunday morning, but today she was waiting for Peeta to show up on the completely opposite side of the woods.

"You came!" Peeta ran to her and threw his arms around her.

Katniss wrapped her arms around his neck and said, "Of course I did."

Peeta whispered into her ear, "I wasn't sure if you would or not." He stepped back and looked into her eyes. "I know you're supposed to be meeting Gale this morning."

Katniss could feel her pulse racing at his closeness. "Gale can wait."

Peeta's hands slid down her arms and captured her fingers. "I missed you." He rested his head against hers.

"I missed you too."

"I hate being away from you."

It was only Sunday. They had seen each other on Friday at school, but it had seemed like an eternity. "I hate being away from you too."

"Katniss? What if I talk to your mother? If I ask her permission?"

"No Peeta." Katniss wasn't worried about her mother. She was worried about his. If his mother had found out that Peeta liked a girl from the Seam, there was no telling what kind of trouble he'd be in. His mother was a witch. She remembered when Peeta had burnt some bread when he was eleven years old. Though she had no proof, Katniss was sure that his mother had hit Peeta across the face for it. The next day at school he had showed up with a black eye. "We can't tell either of our parents about us."

"Why not?"

Katniss needed to protect Peeta. She lifted her hand and cupped Peeta's cheek. Her thumb stroked the area underneath the eye that had been bruised so many years earlier. "It's just better this way."

Peeta's hand covered hers and he leaned down and kissed her cheeks. His lips were so close to her lips, but they didn't touch them. Katniss kissed him back. It was the first time he had ever done that. The first time they had kissed each other.

Katniss touched the remote control and shut the image off. She didn't turn the light on in her room for fear of someone noticing her. She glided her hands against the wall to guide her along the way to the door. She turned the handle and peeked into the hallway. When she was sure no one was there she tiptoed out and slowly made her way towards Peeta's room. She needed to see him. She had to touch him. The most contact they'd had was when their fingers had touched earlier that afternoon. She missed the security of his arms wrapped around her. As she stood outside of his door, she tried to decide on whether or not to knock. If she did she'd run the risk of waking someone else up. She'd go in, she decided. Just as she was about to twist the knob, she heard a voice. Two voices. One male and one female. She leaned her ear against the door trying to make out the

conversation. Did Peeta have another girl in his room, she wondered? Then there was a third voice, this one was Peeta's. After a few seconds Katniss realized that someone was coming. She rushed back down to her room and peeked out of her door, trying to make out who it was that was leaving Peeta's room. Effie! What on earth was Effie Trinket doing in Peeta's room so late at night? Katniss didn't know what was going on, but she was determined to find out. She kept looking out the door, waiting...watching...wondering, but nothing was happening. After thirty minutes passed she saw Effie return to the room with a bottle of something brown. Katniss raised an eyebrow. No doubt it's alcohol for Haymitch. She had just figured out who the other voice in the room was. She sat on the floor and kept a lookout. An hour passed. Two. She continued to doze off with her head against the wall. When she heard a loud yawn coming from down the hall, she sat upright and peered through the crack in the door. Effie and Haymitch headed to their rooms. Katniss looked at the clock. It was after 3:00am. She stood up and closed the bedroom door as quietly as she could. Earlier she wanted to crawl into Peeta's arms, now there were too many questions. What was Peeta doing with Haymitch and Effie behind closed doors? Why wasn't he happy about her eleven? Did he really want her to go home or was he fighting to save his own life?

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Peeta had gotten about three hours of sleep. Haymitch, Effie and Peeta had worked out a plan on what to do in the arena. It was a long shot, but if it worked, then Katniss would stand a good chance in the arena. From now on Peeta had a very important role to play. He just hoped that the last few days of his life wouldn't be spent with Katniss hating him.

"Peeta, are you sure about this? It's quite dangerous," Effie whispered to him as they dished out their breakfast.

"Is there anything in the arena that's safe?" Haymitch asked.

"I suppose not, but this? Really?" Effie asked in a worried tone.

"Look Effie, I know what I'm doing. Let's just stick to the plan, okay. If we keep asking questions, then we're going to make mistakes," Peeta whispered. "None of us got much sleep last night, and we've got a long day ahead of us. Let's just try to...here she comes. Let's sit down."

Effie, Haymitch and Peeta grabbed their seats around the dining room table and proceeded to eat in silence. Just as Peeta was finishing up with his plate of stew, Katniss asked, "So what's on the schedule? You're coaching us on interviews today, right?"

"Well, there's been a change of plans." Haymitch's eyes darted between Peeta and Katniss. "Peeta's asked to be coached separately."

Peeta could feel Katniss' eyes bore through him.

"What?" Katniss threw her fork against her plate. "You did what?" Her voice was cold. "Asked to be coached separately?"

"This sort of things does happen eventually, sweetheart." Haymitch tried to smooth things over.

"If you'll excuse me," Peeta stood up from the table averting his eyes from Katniss at every cost. "I'm full."

Katniss stood up and stared at Peeta's back with a slack jaw. "Fine. That's fine." She had wanted them to do this since the reaping, she

thought to herself. This was for the best. And now she knew what their clandestine meeting was about last night.

"You're going to start with Effie, Katniss." Haymitch and Effie looked at one another as Katniss stared, with pain in her eyes, at Peeta's disappearing figure, as he walked down the hall.

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were Chapter 9: The Interviews, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Game Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Nine: The Interviews

In this chapter you will get a mixture of movie, book and me moments. Mostly me moments! Gale's reaction during the interviews and some other stuff. Once more chapter before the Games people! Once again a big thanks to A for doing the tedious job of correcting my errors!

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

"You look well rested this morning. Did you have a good night's sleep, Effie?" Katniss asked with an overly sweet tone in her voice that was the exact opposite of the look she had on her face.

Effie's smile was bright and charming as she replied, "Why yes I did. Thank you for asking. Now, let's get started!" She smacked her hands together and said, "Dresses first." Effie didn't miss the glare in Katniss' eyes. The girl was shooting darts out of them, but Effie wouldn't rise to the bait. It was her job to make sure Katniss shined on that stage tomorrow and she was determined to make sure that Katniss was going to be every bit of a lady when she sat down with Caesar Flickerman.

Effie ordered the attendants to bring in the garments that Katniss was to wear during her four hour training session. "Why don't you put these on, while I wait here?" The moment Katniss was out of view Effie's whole body slumped into the chair. She was exhausted. She turned to an Avox and asked for a cup of coffee. "Keep them coming. It's going to be a long day." The red headed girl gave her a nod and left the room. When Katniss came back in, wearing the clothes Effie brought for her, the escort immediately scolded her. "Drop that skirt!" Effie's voice quickly turned to honey. "We don't show our ankles when lifting our skirts, dear."

Katniss sneered at Effie. "I'll try and remember that as I'm running for my life in the arena," she mumbled under her breath.

"Just try and remember that during your interview and you'll be fine," Effie said as if they were having a normal conversation. "Now put these shoes on." Effie handed Katniss a pair of high heeled shoes. "We'll practice walking." Effie's smile seemed to light up the entire room. She tilted her head and raised her face to Katniss. "There's so much to do. Come. Come now. Quit staring at the shoes. They can't walk onto your feet. You must put them on yourself."

Katniss had a look of disbelief on her face. The shoes had five inch spikes at the end of them and straps across the top. When her foot was finally secured within, they felt like they were inside of a straight jacket made for feet with tiny little holes at the end for the tips of her toes.

"Wonderful. They look smashing!"

Katniss lifted the skirt up to see her feet, but Effie smacked her hand. "Ouch!" Katniss screamed.

"Not above the ankle!" Once again she had honey dripping from her words. "Now let's practice walking, shall we?"

Effie worked with Katniss for four hours. During that time she had gone through one and a half pots of coffee. She wasn't sure, but she thought that the Avox actually felt pity for her after seeing what she had to deal with. Katniss was getting on Effie's last nerve, but she didn't let it get to her. She was determined to leave Katniss' room smiling even though it was grating. And it was grating! She thought to herself. How on earth could a sweet boy like Peeta be in love with this girl? "Oh my word!" Effie gasped as she watched Katniss kick her shoes off and hike her skirt up to her thighs declaring she was going to eat lunch. No, she didn't understand what Peeta saw in this girl at all.

When Effie entered Peeta's room after lunch she looked him over and said, "Why on earth do you love that girl?" It was in poor manners to ask such a question, Effie knew this, but the boy was going into the arena and giving his life up for Katniss. If Effie was going to be a part of his death, she needed to know.

Peeta laughed and said, "Did she get to you, Effie?"

Effie put a prissy look on her face and spat out, "Well she's a bit short in the manners department, I can tell you that."

Peeta took a seat across from the table that Effie always took her station at. "She's..." He got a far off look in his eyes. "Katniss is the most amazing person I've ever known." He turned to face Effie and continued, "And you know that Effie."

"I do not," she insisted.

"Sure you do." His smile was warm and gentle. "Think about the girl that volunteered for her sister. About the girl that took aim at a room full of Gamemakers and only hit an apple. That didn't bat an eye when Cinna said he was going to set her on fire. Think about that girl, Effie. Think about the girl underneath all of this." Peeta made a sweeping gesture around the room.

Effie turned and stared at Peeta. Thoughts of Katniss began to flood through her mind. She pictured Katniss' face when they watched the recap of the reappings on the train. She had grabbed Peeta's hand when she saw the little girl from District 11 take the stage. It wasn't even her own reaping, thought Effie. She remembered the look on Katniss face last night right before the training scores were going to be announced. The way she looked at Peeta. Effie had never seen two people stare at each other like that before. It was like no one else in the room existed. For a moment she wondered what it was like to be

loved like that. And the girl was brave. It took courage to volunteer for the Games. To risk your life in the arena so someone you loved wouldn't have to face danger. After her stunt in the training center with the Gamemakers, Effie was concerned about what the repercussions would be on herself, as their escort, but Katniss was worried about her family's well being, not her own. She always seemed to be worried about other people first. Effie had to respect the child. She might not have learned very much in the way of manners, but she grew up in District 12, considering that fact, Effie couldn't hold it against her. The one thing Katniss did have was a strong sense of decency. She was a good human being. Effie's face went from rigid to soft.

"She can't walk in high heels very well," Effie said with a regretful tone in her voice.

"I never really cared about high heels when it came to Katniss," Peeta grinned.

Effie looked at Peeta's angelic face and said, "You picked a little spitfire to fall in love with, didn't you?"

Peeta laughed. "A spitfire? I like that."

Effie's laugh joined his. "Well she is." She stood up and got a glass of water. Took a few sips and said, "So what do I need to teach you, that you haven't already taught me?"

Peeta grinned at her and said, "Effie Trinket, I'm going to miss you."

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"She's pretty upset with you, boy." Haymitch walked over to Peeta's bed and sat down next to him.

"I know." Peeta looked at the wall and then turned his attention to Haymitch. "How do you think she's going to react after the interviews tomorrow?"

"She'll be confused. Probably want an explanation."

"I'll have to tell her something, Haymitch."

"So, tell her something. Tell her you were upset about the eleven. Make something up."

"Won't work. Katniss knows when I'm lying." Peeta knew that Katniss could read him like a book.

"Then tell her the truth, just...don't give her too much information. We've still got a game to play, kid." Haymitch put his arm around Peeta's shoulder and gave him a reassuring squeeze. "What the hell is that smell?"

"What smell?"

Haymitch started sniffing at Peeta's shoulder. "Is that you?"

Peeta chuckled and said, "Yeah. I can't quite master these showers. The first day I think I hit the garden variety of soaps, the second was lemons, one day I smelled like the ocean and today..." Peeta lifted his arm and took a sniff. "Yup. It's roses."

Haymitch started laughing. "You've got to use that."

"Use what?"

"With Caesar. Use that story. That's funny stuff."

Peeta chuckled and said, "You think?"

"Hell yes. You're a funny kid, Peeta. Easy going. Caesar will love it."

Peeta thought about it for a second and said, "Okay. Why not? But...how do I get him onto the topic of my love life?"

"I'm sure you can figure that out. If he doesn't bring it up in conversation, you can drop a hint or two about it. Maybe mention something about how you'll never be able to tell the girl you love how you feel. Something like that. Let's practice some fake interview questions."

Haymitch took a seat and started throwing out question after question at Peeta. Peeta answered all of them in a charming, sweet natured way causing Haymitch to genuinely laugh. Since the Capitol only gave each tribute three minutes, all of their practice sessions were limited to that time period. And in each session, Peeta was able to figure out a way to bring up romance and how Katniss never knew that he was in love with her.

Haymitch smacked Peeta on the back and said, "Kid, you're a star. I wouldn't be surprised if the Capitol decided to keep you around so you could take Flickerman's place as host." They laughed as they grabbed their lunch plates.

Haymitch tried his best to keep Peeta occupied during lunch. He didn't want Katniss or Peeta to get into an argument. Peeta was in a fragile state. So was Katniss for that matter. If either one of them had cracked, Haymitch would've said to hell with the plan and let the kids have some time together up on the roof. Who was he to take away

what little time they had together? Fortunately, neither one of them spoke to each other during the meal.

After lunch Haymitch took Katniss to a sitting area where he was going to try the same approach he had done with Peeta. They'd try some fake interviews, but first they had to figure out what kind of approach to take with her. She wasn't as easy going as Peeta, so it was going to be more difficult.

"What?" Katniss had had enough of Haymitch's stares.

"I'm just trying to figure out what to do with you." Haymitch walked around her in a circle. "How we're going to present you. Are you going to be charming? Aloof? Fierce?" He stood back and said, "So far, you're shining like a star." This actually shocked Haymitch. "You volunteered to save your sister. Cinna made you look unforgettable. You've got the top training score." Haymitch tried not to wince when he said that. He wanted Katniss to feel confident with her score. "People are intrigued, but no one knows who you are. The impression you make tomorrow will decide exactly what I can get you in terms of sponsors." Haymitch knew that the impression Peeta made was going to have the sponsors lining up, but only if Katniss' impression was just as good.

"What's Peeta's approach?" Katniss looked away from Haymitch.

"Likable." Haymitch watched as a soft smile crossed Katniss' face. "He has a sort of self-deprecating humor naturally. Whereas when you open your mouth, you come across more as sullen and hostile." The smile was gone and in its place was a scowl.

"I do not!"

The rest of the afternoon was spent bickering back and forth. Haymitch kept reaching for his flask, which he had intentionally left in his room. By the time his four hours with Katniss was up he was desperate for a drink.

When he went to dinner Peeta met him at the table and was about to ask him a question, but Haymitch stopped him with his hand. He poured himself a full glass of whiskey and downed it. Then he poured another and downed that. When he poured the third glass he turned to Peeta and said, "What?"

"Well I was going to ask how it went, but I think I just got my answer."

Haymitch pointed a finger towards Katniss' room and said, "That girl is..."

Peeta smiled at Haymitch and said, "A spitfire?"

"I can think of another word," Haymitch downed his third glass and poured himself another. "Where's Cinna and Portia?"

"They'll be here shortly," said Effie. "Why don't you have something to snack on, Haymitch? You really shouldn't be drinking on an empty stomach."

Haymitch glared at Effie and said, "Why don't you go..."

"Haymitch!" Peeta stopped him before he got his words out. "Effie's right. Besides, you made a deal with me and Katniss. So put down the glass and eat something. I need you to be clear headed."

Haymitch took in the two faces that were staring at him. Peeta's boyish features and Effie's accusing glare. "Fine!" He slammed the glass down and grabbed a plate then started mumbling to himself

about Katniss. Effie and Peeta hid their smiles behind their hands as Cinna and Portia entered the dining room.

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Cinna couldn't wait for Katniss to put on her dress for the interview. Creating something for her to wear was easy, she was a designer's dream come true. She would shine if he had put her in a burlap sack. But the dress he had for her was no sack. It was silk covered in flame colored jewels, but the real fire was the girl herself. Katniss.

When Cinna walked into Katniss' room he was pleased with what he saw, his prep team had followed his instructions to a tee. Katniss was gorgeous. Her skin was glowing. Her hair had been weaved into a pattern that started above her left ear, wrapped around her head and hung over her right shoulder in a long braid. Her silver eyes were a stark comparison to the dark eye make up and her lips were full and red.

"Gorgeous," Cinna smiled. "Close your eyes."

Cinna took the dress out of the bag and with the help of his prep team they put it onto Katniss' petite frame. Cinna adjusted the bodice so it was even. Straightened out the hem and when he was completely satisfied he looked at her reflection in the mirror. His prep team stared at the work of art in front of them.

"Can I open my eyes?"

"Yes. Open them," said Cinna. He watched Katniss as she took in her own reflection. The rubies at the base of the dress, which gradually

blended up into topaz and citrine, then diamonds and little bits of sapphire sprinkled here and there. "Twirl for me."

Cinna dismissed his prep team and talked with Katniss for a little while. "Ready for the interview then?"

"I'm awful. Haymitch called me a dead slug."

How could Haymitch not see everything Peeta saw in this child? Everything I see, Cinna wondered. She is unique in every sense of the word. Her temper, her ferocity is what makes her so special, he thought.

"I just can't be one of those people he wants me to be."

"So be yourself, Katniss."

"Myself? Hah! According to Haymitch, I'm sullen and hostile."

"Well, you are...around Haymitch." Cinna stood up and put his hands on her shoulders. "But not everyone sees that side of you. Isn't there someone out there that knows a different Katniss?"

Katniss' eyes met Cinna's in the mirror. "Yes, but..."

"But what?"

"He's upset with me...about my eleven. He asked to be coached separately."

Cinna smiled at her reflection. "Not everything is as it appears, my dear girl." Cinna was hoping she would understand his meaning.

"Katniss, do you remember the Tribute Parade?"

"Yes."

"So do I. I remember when I walked up to the chariot and what I saw...what I overheard when I got there. Do you remember when I got there?"

He watched as Katniss tried to reach for the memory. Cinna had just walked up to them as they had shared a very intimate look. Katniss had told Peeta to stop staring at her like he wanted to kiss her and Peeta had said that he did want to kiss her.

"Yes," Her eyes met Cinna's in the mirror again. The flash of recognition was there. "I remember."

Cinna leaned in closer and repeated, "Good. Then you can just pretend like you're talking to a friend. A special friend."

"I don't think so, Cinna. He's very upset." Her eyelids drooped.

"I have a message for you." Cinna leaned in, covered his lips with his hand and whispered in her ear. Katniss' eyes flashed brightly into the mirror and met Cinna's gaze. Cinna pulled his hand away from her ear and told her, "Like I said, not everything is as it appears."

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Gale stood at the edge of town staring at the large television screen. His mother had wanted him to stay home and watch the interviews there, but he didn't want his every move to be scrutinized and lately that's all she seemed to be doing. He felt the baker's hand on his shoulder and turned to him.

"Gale."

"Hello, sir."

Gale knew the man would come alone. He hadn't seen his wife since reaping day.

"How're you holding up?"

"Okay." Gale answered. "You?"

"Not too good."

Gale stared straight ahead. He was having a hard time facing the man. Tomorrow morning his son was going to put his life on the line for Katniss. After that, Gale had no clue if he'd ever be able to face the baker again.

The familiar face of Caesar Flickerman filled the screen. His white teeth flashed through his blue lips. His skin was covered in white makeup and his hair was pulled back in a puffy ponytail. Gale tried not to hate the man, but it was hard not to hate anyone associated with the Capitol.

The baker and Gale watched as the girl from District 1, Glimmer, was called out onto the center stage. Each of the tributes was sitting on a stage to the side of Caesar, but the cameras didn't show them. They were focused on Caesar and his interviewee. Gale's eyes opened wide as he took in the see through gold gown Glimmer was wearing.

"She's a looker. Sponsors will be taking notice of her."

"Plus she's a Career," Gale added.

They listened to the girl's flirtatious interview as she listed off all of her attributes. Caesar laughed when he was supposed to, flirted when he should've and fawned over her just as the girl's mentor intended. In Gale's opinion, the interview went off without a hitch.

"Let's welcome, Marvel!" Caesar called out.

When the boy from District 1 took center stage, Gale's stomach formed into tight knots.

Gale looked at the baker, who was staring at the screen, then back at the television. His thoughts kept going back to Katniss. Could Peeta actually help her? He had only seen two of the Careers interviews and Gale was already petrified. The girl from District 2 was slightly bigger than Katniss, but she seemed menacing. And when the boy from District 2 took his spot with Caesar, Gale's mouth went dry.

"Dear God," he heard the fear in the baker's voice.

Gale turned and looked at the man. His face was as white as a sheet. Gale put his hand on the man's shoulder and said, "Peeta's strong." The baker nodded his head absently as Gale removed his hand.

One by one each tribute took center stage and with each one, Gale was reminded that Katniss' life depended on their deaths. When he saw the dark skinned girl from District 11 take her seat with Caesar, his heart broke. She was wearing wings on her back. She looked like a little angel. Gale had to turn away from the screen. He couldn't help but think, if Catnip hadn't volunteered for Prim, that could be Prim sitting with Caesar. When her district partner went up for his interview all feelings of pity for the girl were gone. In its place was fear. In that moment, Gale wished that he had volunteered for the Games himself. That he had gone into the arena so he could kill these people. There was no way, Peeta Mellark, the baker's son, could keep Katniss safe. There was nothing he could do to save her life.

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Katniss stood backstage, trying her best to stay calm. She eyed up the other tributes, taking in their costumes, trying to figure out what message their mentors were trying to send to the sponsors. When Peeta walked in with Haymitch, her heart skipped a beat. Peeta looked breathtaking in a black suit with flames up the sleeves. Katniss couldn't help but think that Portia knew what she was doing when she designed the suit. Peeta's eyes looked like they were glowing in contrast to the clothing. She wanted to talk to him. To tell him that she got his message, but she couldn't risk it in front of the other tributes. If only he would look at her, she thought. She could just nod at him or give him a smile...something, but he didn't even glance her way.

"I want you two to act like a happy pair," said Haymitch. "Remember, you're proud to be from District 12," He whispered to them just as they walked onto the stage to take their seats.

Katniss plastered a smile onto her face and walked to her designated spot. She stared into the crowd that had gathered at the City Center. She wondered how many people were there. She thought of the interviews she had watched in previous years and remembered Caesar Flickerman saying, "Over one hundred thousand people are here to get a glimpse of the tributes." But Katniss couldn't remember if that was for the parade or the interviews.

She watched the girl from District 1 walk to greet Caesar and rolled her eyes as she heard her name. Glimmer. Katniss noticed the sheer fabric that the girl's stylist had put her in. Obviously her mentor was going for sexy, thought Katniss. As if sex was going to help her in the arena.

As the boy from District 1 went to the stage she tried to remember what his training score was. She listened to him talk about how fierce he thought he was, and Katniss had to admit, he sounded terrifying.

When the girl from District 2 took the stage she couldn't help but chastise her for lifting her skirt up past her ankles. Once she took her place with Caesar, Katniss forgot all about the skirt and remembered the girl's gift with knife throwing. The girl had an intimidating demeanor, but Katniss knew if she could get her hands on a bow and arrow she could take out all of the Careers. She lifted the corner of her mouth in a ominous smile.

When the boy from District 4 took the stage, Katniss thought back to how he had tossed around the assistant during hand to hand combat. Once again, she hoped someone else killed him before he could get to her.

The closer the interviews got to her, the more her stomach flopped around. Her eyes shot around the audience...the stage...and landed on Cinna. He ducked his head down and gave her a little nod.

Caesar Flickerman stood up. Walked to the front of the stage and announced, "You know her as the girl on fire! From District 12! Katniss Everdeen!"

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Peeta paced around his room as Haymitch took little sips out of his flask.

"Knock it off. You're making me nervous," Haymitch told him.

"Sorry." Peeta sat on the edge of his bed, got up and started pacing again.

"Peeta. You need to calm down," Portia said. "Okay. I've fixed it." She took the jacket of the suit she had designed for his interview, off of the hanger and handed it to him. "Why don't you put this on?"

"Sorry about the button," Peeta mumbled.

"It's okay. It happens."

"Get dressed," Haymitch barked at Peeta.

"Why don't you get dressed, Haymitch?" Portia suggested. "We're leaving in forty-five minutes and you haven't even gotten changed yet."

Haymitch looked down at his clothes and said, "I'll be back in ten minutes. Don't leave without me."

Once Haymitch left, Peeta rushed over to Portia and said, "I'm worried about Katniss' interview."

"She'll be fine, Peeta."

"No she won't. She doesn't like to talk to people."

"I'm sure Haymitch worked with her..."

"No, Portia." Peeta shook his head. "You don't understand." Peeta took hold of Portia's hands. "When she gets nervous she kind of...shuts down or...or...erupts."

"Erupts?" Portia had a nervous look on her face.

"Can you do me a favor? Can you get a message to her for me?"

"I can try."

"No, Portia. You can't try. You have to do it! Promise me, you'll do it."
Peeta squeezed her hands.

"Okay, Peeta. What do you want me to tell her?"

Peeta knew what would help Katniss get to that comfortable, relaxed state of mind, but Portia couldn't relay an entire dialogue. What could he tell her to help her feel more at ease, he wondered? He smiled softly and told Portia, "Tell her..." Peeta looked around the room and remembered that there were people listening to everything he said. He ducked his head down and whispered into Portia's ear.

Portia's eyes questioned him. "You want me to tell her that?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?" Portia stood there with disbelief written all over her face.

"That's it, Portia. She'll understand what I mean. I swear."

"Okay. I'll be right back."

Peeta peered out his door and watched as Portia caught Cinna before he entered Katniss' room. He saw her whisper to him and saw the look on Cinna's face as he nodded yes. Peeta felt a huge weight being lifted off of his shoulders. Katniss would be alright.

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"You know her as the girl on fire! From District 12!" Caesar Flickerman announced. "Katniss Everdeen!"

Gale's heart was pounding a mile a minute when he saw Katniss walk to the center of the stage. Everyone that had gathered to watch the interviews in the square was cheering...whistling...howling...calling out Katniss' name, but Gale couldn't hear a thing. All he could do was stare at his Catnip. "Wow," he said under his breath. He had never seen her look more beautiful.

Caesar was saying something to her, but Gale couldn't hear him. He felt the baker's hand on his shoulder and his spell was broken. "She looks lovely."

"Yeah," Gale agreed.

Gale had missed the first few questions of Katniss' interview. She was currently saying something about her friend and eating by a tree in District 12. Gale's face lit up with a smile. He knew Katniss couldn't come right out and say that they snuck into the woods and ate illegally. Poaching from the Capitol was a deadly offense. Gale was flattered that Katniss had found a way to tell him that she missed him.

Gale's train of thought was completely lost when Katniss stood up and spun in a circle. The dress she wore looked like it was being engulfed in flames. The lights that were shining onto the stage reflected off of the different colored jewels on her dress. Highlighting the dark reds, yellows and gold. Between those were an occasional flash of blue giving the impression of a flame.

All of District 12 cheered as Katniss twirled around. Gale called out, "Way to go, Catnip!" He laughed when she got dizzy and Caesar had to help her to her chair.

Gale turned to the baker who was smiling and shook his hand.

"That was something. Thank you for that, Katniss. Thank you," said Caesar. "Now. I'd like to ask you just one more thing. It's about your sister."

"Prim," said Katniss.

"Yes. I think we were," Caesar turned to the audience and made a gesture. "All of us...touched, when you volunteered for her during the reaping."

Gale's heart dropped into his stomach at the memory of that day.

"Did she come to see you before you left?" Asked Caesar.

"Yes," Katniss said in a hushed tone.

"And what did you say to her?"

"I told her I would try to win. That I would try to win for her."

"And try you will," Caesar said in an encouraging voice. He lifted Katniss' hand up in the air and walked her to the front of the stage.

"Ladies and Gentlemen! From District 12! Katniss Everdeen! The girl on fire!"

Gale listened as the people around him cheered for his friend. "See you soon, Catnip," he whispered. "See you soon."

"And now for our final tribute. From District 12! Let's give a big round of applause to the charming, Peeta Mellark!" Caesar held his hand out and shook Peeta's.

Gale gave the baker a quick look before taking in Peeta's interview.

"Well, hello Peeta. Good to meet you," Caesar said.

"Good to meet you too," Peeta smiled.

"So tell me, how are you finding the Capitol? And don't say with a map!" Caesar laughed.

Peeta leaned forward and mimicked Caesar's pose. "Actually Caesar things are quite...different here."

"Different?"

"Yes."

"Like what?"

"For example, your showers."

"Our showers are different?" Caesar asked.

"Yes. Back home we just have a bar of soap. Here you've got buttons that dispense different types of foam and if you're not careful, who knows what you'll wind up smelling like."

"Oh my. Well, what do you smell like?"

"Lucky for me, everything's coming up roses." Peeta grinned.

Caesar laughed at him and said, "Roses?"

"Yeah. Take a whiff." Peeta held out his arm and Caesar sniffed it.

"Mmmmmm." Caesar held out his arm for Peeta to sniff. "Do I..."

"Oh, you definitely smell better than I do."

"Oh, well I've lived here longer," Caesar explained.

Everyone laughed including Gale. He turned to look at Peeta's father and noticed that the man was smiling, but he had tears in his eyes.

"You're a funny kid, Peeta."

"Better be careful, Caesar. I might win this thing and take your job." Peeta joked.

Caesar put his hand against his chest and feigned fear, which caused another roar of laughter.

When the laughter died down Caesar said, "Tell me Peeta, what do you plan on doing if you win the Games?"

Peeta let out a small, sad laugh and looked to the ground before addressing Caesar. "I've got this image...it's a dream really...of what life could be like if I won the Games."

"Do tell," Caesar's face lit up.

"I'd go home and the girl I've been..." Peeta blushed, ran his hands up and down his thighs and continued. "Well, I've sort of been in love with her my whole life." Peeta looked at Caesar as though he were sharing a secret with his best friend. "See, my dream is to go home, and she's there, waiting at the train station for me and when I get home, she runs into my arms."

Gale was getting nervous. Was he talking about Katniss? Was there someone else in District 12 that he liked? He didn't understand where Peeta was going with his interview.

Caesar, slapped him on the back and said, "That sounds like a great plan."

"Yeah...well..." Peeta lifted his shoulder in a defeatist shrug.

"What's the problem?"

"There are a few problems. For starters, she didn't even notice me until the reaping." Peeta lifted his face to the crowd and put on a humble grin. "I was too shy to tell her how I felt."

"Oh." Caesar dragged the word out. "Well I tell you what you do. You win this thing and then she'll have to go out with you! Am I right folks?" The entire Capitol audience started applauding.

Peeta waited until the applause died down. "Winning won't really help me," his voice cracked.

"Why ever not?"

"Because...she came here with me." Peeta looked out into the audience. Heartbreak was written all over his face.

Gale knew how Peeta felt about Katniss. He had heard Peeta's father say it. He was in love with her, but hearing the words come out of Peeta's mouth was like taking a punch to the gut. Gale crouched down and rested his elbows on his knees. He formed a fist with one hand and wrapped his other hand around it. He continued to watch the interview as his stomach got tighter and tighter. The television screen was now filled with both Katniss and Peeta's faces. Katniss' face was red. She was blushing. In all the years Gale had known her, he had never seen her blush. Catnip doesn't blush, he thought to himself. Well you're watching her blush right now! She looked like she was cold. Her eyes were glistening. Gale couldn't get a read off of her. He didn't recognize her.

"Oh, Peeta. That is a stroke of bad luck. And you say she had no clue?" Asked Caesar.

Peeta turned and looked at Caesar. "Well, I'm not sure that I've been hiding my feelings that well since we've been here, but no...I've never come right out and told her how I've felt."

"No one could blame you for falling for a girl like that. She's something."

Peeta nodded his head in agreement.

"Peeta, I think all of our hearts go with you..." Caesar made a sweeping gesture towards the watching crowd. "With both of you. I wish you the best of luck."

"Thank you, Caesar." Peeta turned to the crowd. "Thank you."

Gale watched Peeta walk away from the television host. The cameras were still focused on both him and Katniss. The closer Peeta got to Katniss, the brighter her skin got. When Peeta came into her view, she gave him one quick look. Gale expected to see hard, cold eyes, but he didn't. Instead he saw soft, sorrowful...loving eyes. She closed them as though looking at him hurt her. Gale couldn't figure out what was going on. Did Katniss pity Peeta?

There was noise everywhere. People talking, screaming, cheering...laughing. Gale overheard someone saying, "Katniss and your boy just wiped them all off the map with those interviews. Sponsors will be coming out of the woodwork for them, Mellark." Gale's head snapped up to see who was talking to the baker, but he missed the man. He felt the baker's hand on his shoulder, lifting him from his crouching position.

"Let's go. Come on, Gale."

The pair walked side by side in silence. Gale heard the man's occasional sniff and noticed him wiping at his nose on occasion, but Gale didn't say a thing to him. How was he to come back and face this man? How was he supposed to see an older version of Peeta everyday? Gale didn't think he could do it. He began to fight a battle inside of his head. Prim needs the food. Your family needs the food. But he's Peeta's family. Yes and Peeta is going to try and save Katniss' life. How? By proclaiming he loves her on national television? What good will that do? Gale began to wonder why Peeta did what he did. What good would come of it? Would it get them sponsors? Was the man from the square right? He thought about the audience reactions when Peeta proclaimed his love for her. They appeared to be just as heartbroken as Peeta. And when he walked off the stage to stand next to her...they went crazy. All of these thoughts kept going through his head, but the one thought that he kept going back to was, Katniss is mine and you can't have her.

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Katniss began walking towards the center of the stage, wishing she had a way to wipe her sweaty palms off. When she realized that she wasn't smiling she remembered Effie's words, "Just act like you're in a room full of friends." But Katniss knew she wasn't in a room full of friends. She was at the City Center being shown off in front of thousands and thousands of strangers. There were only a few people here she would even remotely consider friends...acquaintances were more like it, but there was one person...one person that she'd smile at anywhere. One person that was more than just her friend. She pictured Peeta standing at the center of the stage in his black suit with flames going up the arms, holding out his hand to her, not Caesar Flickerman in a powder blue suit. She imagined Peeta's blue eyes, not

Caesar's blue hair and when she reached her destination the smile she had on her face was truly genuine and meant for Peeta.

The roar of the crowd, the bright lights, Caesar's gleaming teeth...all of it caused Katniss to feel a little shaky. Once again she had to remind herself that she wasn't in a room full of strangers. She could do this. Just pretend, Katniss. She could hear Peeta's voice in her head, but it wasn't Peeta's voice. It was Caesar's and he was asking her a question.

"What?" Katniss looked around at the audience as they started to laugh. Katniss' nerves were getting the best of her. She looked out into the audience when she heard their laughter. The lump that was forming in her throat was getting larger. She glanced to the side and saw Cinna. He gave her a little nod. She remembered the message he whispered into her ear.

"You're sitting by the oak tree..."

She tried to conjure up Peeta's voice. She repeated the words in her head. You're sitting by the oak tree. You're sitting by the oak tree. But Peeta was nowhere to be found. Suddenly she heard him.

"What do you smell, Katniss?"

Cinnamon and dill...you, she thought. You. I smell you, Peeta. Katniss inhaled through her nose imaging Peeta's scent and pushed her fears aside.

"I think someone's a little nervous." Caesar said with a wink. "I said the Capitol's quite a change from District 12. What are you enjoying the most about it?"

Peeta, thought Katniss, but instead she said, "The lamb stew."

"The one with the dried plumbs. Oh I eat it by the bucket full." Caesar laughed as he grabbed his stomach. "It doesn't show does it?"

Katniss laughed at his joke and said, "I'd love to take a bucket full of that stew and have a picnic by my favorite oak tree, back home, with..." She didn't know how to describe Peeta without giving her feelings away. "...with the friend that's dearest to my heart." She hoped Peeta understood her meaning.

"Well, I hope you get that chance." Caesar sat at the edge of his seat and squinted his eyes a bit. "I must say...that was quite an entrance you made in the Tribute Parade the other day. Want to tell us about it?"

"Well I was just hoping that I wouldn't burn to death." Katniss took a breath and listened to Caesar's next comment.

"When you came out on that chariot, I have to say, my heart stopped." Caesar placed his hand on his chest to accentuate the point and turned to the audience. "Did any of you experience this?" They responded with cries and cheers. "My heart stopped."

"So did mine," Katniss admitted. "Cinna did an amazing job on my costume. I couldn't believe it when I put it on. I still can't believe I'm wearing this! Isn't it gorgeous?" She glanced at Cinna as he took in the accolades the audience was giving him. When she saw him make a gesture with his hand, Katniss knew it was meant for her. He was saying, twirl for me.

Katniss stood up and spun in a circle, letting the dress do its magic. The audience went wild once again as did Caesar. When she felt dizzy, she stopped. Fortunately she felt Caesar's hands guide her to her chair.

"That was something. Thank you for that, Katniss. Thank you."

Katniss wasn't sure what she had done to deserve such gratitude. She spun in a circle and showed off a magnificent dress, but these people were shallow. Seeing such a thing would probably be the highlight of their year, she thought. No that would be the death of twenty three children.

"Now. I'd like to ask you just one more thing. It's about your sister."

"Prim?" Katniss knew Caesar would bring up the reaping. Peeta had told her this was the course to take during the interview. He was trying to help her, but she wouldn't let him. She wished she had.

"Yes. I think we were...all of us...touched, when you volunteered for her during the reaping. Did she come to see you before you left?"
Asked Caesar.

"Yes," Katniss remembered Prim's eyes. They were filled with tears.
With pain.

"And what did you say to her?"

"I told her I would try to win. That I would try to win for her."

"And try you will." Katniss heard the buzzer sound that meant the end of her three minutes with Caesar. She felt him take her hand and lift her arm in the air. "Ladies and Gentlemen! From District 12! Katniss Everdeen! The girl on fire!"

She could feel the weight of her dress with each step she took as she headed back to her seat. Prim. She missed her sister. The entire time she had been at the Capitol training for the Games, she had been pushing her feelings of loneliness to the back of her mind. They hurt

too much. She had been concentrating on her training. On Peeta. On herself. She felt selfish and alone. She took her seat just as Peeta was standing up.

"And now for our final tribute. From District 12! Let's give a big round of applause to the charming, Peeta Mellark!" Caesar held his hand out and shook Peeta's.

Katniss looked at the large television screen and saw Peeta's image fill it. She missed him too. He had been here with her the entire time, yet he felt so far away. Just as far, if not further than Prim. He had made her promise not to pull away, but he had pulled away from her just to turn around and send that message through Cinna. What did it all mean? She was so confused. Her eyes did a double take as she noticed Peeta and Caesar smiling one another.

"Oh, well I've lived here longer," Caesar said.

Katniss heard everyone laughing including a handful of tributes. She wondered what Peeta had done to get them to laugh.

"You're a funny kid, Peeta."

"Better be careful, Caesar. I might win this thing and take your job." Peeta said in that way that Katniss had come to know as his devilishly funny side.

Katniss stifled a smile when Caesar pretended to be hurt by Peeta's comment.

"Tell me Peeta, what do you plan on doing if you win the Games?"

Katniss noticed the sad look in Peeta's eyes. He's not planning on winning the Games, she thought. She listened as Peeta pulled all of

Panem in with his melodic voice. "I've got this image...it's a dream really...of what life could be like if I won the Games."

"Do tell."

"I'd go home and the girl I've been...well, I've sort of been in love with her my whole life." Katniss' heart started to race. No. She thought. What is he doing? "See, my dream is to go home, and she's there, waiting at the train station for me and when I get home, she runs into my arms."

"That sounds like a great plan."

"Yeah...well..." Peeta shrugged at Caesar.

"What's the problem?" Caesar asked.

"There are a few problems. For starters, she didn't even notice me until the reaping." Katniss was very confused. Was Peeta talking about another girl? "I was too shy to tell her how I felt."

"Oh. Well, I tell you what you do. You win this thing and then she'll have to go out with you! Am I right folks?" The entire Capitol audience started applauding.

"Winning won't really help me." Katniss heart broke when she heard the crack in Peeta's voice. No. There was no one else.

"Why ever not?"

"Because she came here with me." There would never be anyone else for Peeta.

Katniss had to fight to keep her hands from flying up to hide her blushing cheeks. She swallowed lump after lump that formed in her

throat. Shivers were running up and down her spine. Peeta had just told the entire country that he was in love with her. That he'd been in love with her his whole life. She forced herself to look straight ahead and listen to the rest of his interview.

"Oh, Peeta. That is a stroke of bad luck. And you say she had no clue?" Caesar asked him.

"Well, I'm not sure that I've been hiding my feelings that well since we've been here, but no...I've never come right out and told her how I've felt."

"No one could blame you for falling for a girl like that. She's something." There was a pause before Caesar continued. "Peeta, I think all of our hearts go with you...with both of you. I wish you the best of luck."

"Thank you Caesar. Thank you."

Katniss eyes flashed to the television screen to see Peeta as he walked back towards her. Her image had filled up half of the screen. Oh, Peeta, she thought. What have you done? She wanted to yell at him. Scream at him. When he got close enough she darted her eyes towards his. She had intended on glaring at him, instead the shocking blue of his eyes melted her reserves and all she could think of was why didn't you tell me first? She held his gaze for several seconds then closed her eyes. She found it difficult to face him. It hurt too much. She looked away knowing that there were hundreds of thousands of people staring at them right now. Staring at her. Wondering what was going through her mind, but twenty two of them were currently plotting her demise. Once again, she thought, what have you done, Peeta? What have you done?

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were Chapter 10: Let the Games Begin, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Ten: Let the Games Begin!

WOW! These chapters are long! Lots of POV's. During the Games there will be tons of POV's. Gale's, Cinna's, Haymitch's, Effie's...Everybody's watching, right? Anyway... In this chapter, Katniss reacts to the interview. Gale figures some things out and

Peeta does something he's been dying to do. Once again, thank you A! Trust me when I say, without A, you'd be reading a mass confusion of words!

74th Hunger Game Challenge!

Katniss followed the line of tributes off of the stage. She stayed focused on the broad back of the boy from District 11 walking in front of her. Her teeth were clenched. Her jaw tight. Her hands were in rigid little balls. Her body language screamed anger, but her face, her eyes cried out in sorrow. The crowd backstage appeared out of nowhere. She felt a hand on her arm. Her first thought was that it was Peeta, but the hand was covered in a lace glove.

"You were wonderful, darling. Wonderful." Effie put her arm around Katniss' back and led her towards a door. "This way."

"Great job, sweetheart." Haymitch made his way through the crowd to congratulate her. He stopped for a second and then looked past her. "Great job," he said as he walked away.

Katniss tried to see where he was going but Effie kept ushering her towards the exit. She scanned the crowd and saw Cinna in the distance, who gave her a thumb's up. Portia smiled and made a little applauding motion. When Effie saw the pair she immediately headed towards them. Katniss was herded into the Training Center lobby along with the other tributes and eventually made it onto the elevators. As the doors closed she saw the tributes from District 2 look in her direction and laugh. She tried to keep her emotions in check as four of her competitors joined her on the ride up. Anger started to bubble deep within the pit of her core. Frustration. Confusion. Betrayal. By the time the elevator emptied out, she had worked herself up into a silent frenzy. When the doors to the elevator opened up onto her floor the object of her thoughts walked passed her. Peeta!

"What the hell was that?!" Katniss turned him around forcefully, by the shoulder, so he could face her. He obviously wasn't expecting it and he lost his balance which caused him to crash into a crystal vase full of flowers.

Katniss stood over him and looked down trying to register what just happened. What she had just done. When it finally hit her she said, "Oh my God, Peeta. I'm sorry." She reached down and started to lift him up. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"It's okay...uuhh..." Peeta grimaced as he put pressure on his hand to stand up.

"What happened?" Effie stepped off of the elevator with the rest of the group in her wake.

"I fell." Peeta looked up at her from a sitting position on the ground.

"No you didn't. I pushed you." Katniss' wondered why Peeta was trying to make up an excuse for her. He only made up excuses when his mother hurt him. The thought took Katniss back. She felt like someone let the air out of her lungs.

"You didn't push me, Katniss."

"You're bleeding all over the carpeting!" Cried Effie.

Katniss stared at Peeta's bloody hand wondering what she had just done. She wasn't supposed to hurt Peeta. His mother did that. Katniss kissed his bruises...kissed his pain away. She didn't *cause* his pain.

Haymitch gave Peeta a helping hand and lifted him off of the ground. "So why'd you push him?"

"She didn't push me," corrected Peeta.

"Yes I did." Katniss said absentmindedly.

"You didn't push me."

"Let me look at this," Portia made her way over and started to take care of Peeta's injuries. She guided him to the sofa. "Effie, I'll need something to stop this bleeding." There were no attendants in the suite.

"So...you were getting ready to yell at me," Peeta said to Katniss in a very sweet voice.

"No. I wasn't." Katniss looked over at the damage she had caused to Peeta's hand and saw Portia remove a piece of glass. She heard Peeta suck in a breath between clenched teeth. Katniss had barely moved from her spot since the incident occurred.

"Yes you were." Peeta chuckled. "Go ahead. Yell. Tell me why you're mad."

"I'm not mad." Katniss turned away from the scene and looked straight ahead. Her voice was trembling. Her eyes and face were stone.

"Yes you are. You're pissed as hell, Katniss."

Cinna put his hand on Katniss shoulder and said quietly in her ear, "Katniss? Are you okay?"

The witch hurt Peeta. Not me, thought Katniss. I'm not supposed to do that to him and now he's bleeding because of me.

"Katniss!" Peeta called her name. Trying his best to snap her out of her thoughts.

"What?" She turned to Peeta. "What?" She said softer.

"Yell, Katniss. Scream." Peeta insisted. "Come on." He pleaded "I need something to take my mind off of this." Peeta gave her a painful grin. "Please?"

She looked at Peeta. At Haymitch...Effie. Everyone seemed to be questioning her with their eyes. Katniss had questions to ask too, she thought. Katniss had so many questions to ask Peeta, but a lot of them were private. Things she didn't want everyone to know. There was one thing she had to...no...needed to know, but that was before. Now...

"Katniss?" Peeta kept trying to pull her focus.

"I'm sorry I pushed you." Katniss got the apology out, but there was still so much going on inside of her mind. There were too many emotions rushing through her. She didn't know how to handle them. She knew she had to snap out of this stupor she was starting to fall into.

"For the last time. You didn't push me! I tripped. I tripped, Katniss." Peeta called to her again and said, "Are you listening to me?" When she finally turned her face to his, he said, "Tributes aren't allowed to push each other. That's breaking the rules. You wouldn't break the rules, would you, Katniss?"

The rules? Katniss didn't care about the rules. She cared about what had happened to his hand. What had been happening between them for the past few days? She cared about the tributes from District 2 laughing at her as she stepped onto the elevator. "Why did you say that tonight, Peeta? Why did you tell them that you've had feelings for me? Do you know how that made me look?" She didn't know where the question came from, but she needed to know the answer.

"I know exactly how you looked, Katniss." Peeta answered.

"You made me look weak tonight, Peeta." Earlier she would've yelled this at him. He was right about that, but now her voice was filled with anguish. "You made me look weak."

"He made you look desirable, sweetheart," said Haymitch.

Katniss gave her mentor an empty stare and turned her attention back to Peeta when he said, "She doesn't need my help with that."

Katniss gave Peeta a look of inquiry as if saying, 'what's that supposed to mean?' Katniss hadn't been wearing a see through dress like Garnet or Shimmer or whatever District 1's name was. She hadn't hiked her skirt up to the middle of her calves like District 2 did.

"And why did you say I didn't notice you until the reaping?" Portia bandaged up Peeta's hand and he walked into the bar area to pour a drink. He was ignoring her and Katniss didn't like it. "I asked you a question." She could feel it now. Feel what she had felt in the elevator.

"I heard you," Peeta said, disregarding the question entirely.

"Then answer me," Frustration was starting to build back up within Katniss' system. "Why did you say that?" Her voice was starting to rise.

"Because I can sell the star crossed lovers of District 12!" Haymitch yelled from across the room.

Katniss turned on her heels and said, "But we're not star crossed lovers! We're..."

"It's a *television* show!" Haymitch interrupted her before she could say anything more.

Cinna walked up to Katniss and took her by the shoulders. "He's right, Katniss. Peeta helped you tonight."

Katniss turned and surveyed the room. Everyone but Peeta was looking at her.

"Katniss, the sponsors are going to eat this up." Haymitch threw his hands up in the air and said, "You're all they're talking about! Geez! The kid did you a favor!"

She looked over her shoulder at Peeta. His back was still to her. Thoughts were flying through her mind. Will sponsors really fall for this? What's Peeta drinking? Will the other tributes even care about this? I wonder if Gale was watching. The witch is going to punish Peeta for falling in love with someone from the Seam. Star crossed lovers? Had Peeta and Haymitch been planning this the entire time? Everything is not as it appears. Isn't that what Cinna had said? Katniss looked around the room again, taking in everyone's expression.

Cinna was squeezing her shoulders, reassuringly and nodding his head.

Haymitch gave her a look then raised his eyebrows at her as if saying, 'get it now?'

Effie's face had guilt written all over it.

Portia couldn't make eye contact with her and kept looking at different spots on the floor.

They had all been planning this from the very start. Effie and Haymitch's late night meeting. Peeta's message sent through Cinna. Portia...she was his stylist. She had to know. And Peeta...her Peeta had gone along with all of it to save her life. To get her much needed

sponsors. He gave up what little time they had left just to play a role in the Games.

Katniss looked at him as he stood with his one good hand resting on the bar. His shoulders slumped over. She quietly called his name, "Peeta?"

"Don't worry, Katniss." His voice sounded distant. "You didn't say *you* loved me too, so you're not the one that looks weak... I do." He drank the rest of his drink and said, "I'm going to change for dinner." He walked to his room without looking back.

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Peeta stared at the crowd gathered in the street below him, but he didn't see people, he didn't hear their chanting or their cheers. All he saw was the beautiful colors splashed before his eyes. Shades of cheerful pink. Bursts of sunny yellow. Greens that ranged from bright neon to deep as a pine tree's needles. Behind him were the gentle tings of the wind chimes, ringing out a melody with every current of air.

He had tried to sleep, but it didn't come. There was too much on his mind.

He felt horrible after making that comment to Katniss. He shouldn't have drunk the whiskey that Haymitch was so fond of. It burned when it went down and after draining half a glass of the stuff, Peeta had felt like his head was in a daze. When he sat down to eat dinner his hand started bleeding again. He saw the guilt on Katniss' face. He wanted to tell her it wasn't her fault, but he was afraid to open his mouth again for fear that he might say something stupid. Somehow Portia had gotten a hold of some medicine from the medical center located on the

lower levels and she assured him that the cut would be gone by morning. The moment she had put it on his hand, he had felt relief.

After Portia had fixed up his hand Haymitch had taken him upstairs to the roof. "Why don't we get a breath of fresh air before the recaps?"

Peeta followed his mentor, knowing that this would be the last opportunity they'd have to speak in private before the Games began.

They faced each other and spoke in hushed tones.

"You ready for this?" Peeta knew Haymitch was asking him about the arena.

"What do you think?"

"Look. The one thing the Careers are notorious for is predictability. Just stick to the plan and everything will work out." Haymitch gave Peeta a crafty smile. "You did good tonight, kid. The sponsors are already asking about the two of you."

Peeta knew they'd be intrigued. "Good. Now all you have to do is get them to spend their money."

"I can do that. You and Katniss should be..."

Peeta stopped Haymitch by putting a hand on his chest. "You and I are going to make a new deal."

"A new deal? I've already stayed fairly sober, boy." Haymitch gave Peeta a look of warning.

"Don't try and compare your alcohol with Katniss, because that's what I've given up. I gave up her and the little time I had with her, so yeah...you and me...we've got a new deal." Peeta stared Haymitch

down. "And this is how it's going to go." Peeta told Haymitch what he wanted and watched as his mentor's eyes flashed with pain. Peeta held his hand out to him and said, "Shake on it." Haymitch put his hand in Peeta's. "Now, swear it."

"I swear on my life, kid."

"Sorry, that's not good enough. You don't hold yourself in very high regards. Swear on *hers*. Swear on Katniss' life." Peeta knew he had Haymitch the second he said that. The look on Haymitch's face told him exactly how much Katniss had come to mean to him over the past few days. Peeta waited for Haymitch's reply. He felt the man's hand quake within his own and then squeeze.

"Okay, kid. I swear on her life."

When they sat down to watch the recap of the interviews, Peeta's heart fluttered, like it did the first time he heard Katniss talk about eating lamb stew with him during her interview. He wanted to grab her right then and there and drag her away from all of the craziness that was about to be forced upon them. To run as far away as possible. He was in awe as he watched her spin in her dress. It was so unlike her. She had done everything right during her interview. She was perfect in every way. Peeta's own interview had been the icing on Katniss' cake. Haymitch was right. The Capitol was eating up their whole star crossed lovers bit. Effie had gone downstairs for a little while prior to dinner and when she came back up she reported back to Haymitch. All anyone was talking about were the pair of tributes from District 12.

Peeta continued to stare at the crowd of people below him, wishing he had some paints...a sketchpad...anything to take his mind off of the events that occurred earlier in the evening.

"They look like a flock of freakish birds."

Peeta jumped a little at the sound of Katniss' voice. "You think?"

"Don't you?"

"Actually," he looked over his shoulder at her and said, "I was thinking it would be pretty neat to paint them. Look at all the colors." He began pointing out the people in the street. "See how they're all mixed about? It'd be pretty on a canvas, don't you think?"

Katniss walked closer to the edge of the roof and looked at the scene then looked at Peeta. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?" He turned to her.

"That...thing? Where you...I don't know. It's like...all I see are a bunch of people from the Capitol having a party because tomorrow twenty four of us are going to fight to the death. And you see..." She stared into his eyes and he felt a surge of warmth run through him. "You see a work of art."

"Actually, I see both." Katniss' features were soft and comforting. He wanted to reach out and touch her. To hold her, but he didn't know where he stood with her anymore.

Katniss shook her head and said, "You've always seen the good in people, Peeta." She placed her fingertips on the edge of the roof, just inches away from the force field, and stared up at the moon. "I just wish I knew what you saw in me."

He stepped behind her and spoke softly. "There's so much good inside of you, Katniss. Everybody sees it." He turned her by the shoulders and said, "Want to know what I wish? I wish you'd see that for yourself."

They took in each other's moonlit features. Both of them wanting to apologize for their actions earlier in the evening. Both of them too afraid to do so.

"So, I take it you couldn't sleep either?" Peeta asked, breaking the tension that had been building up between them.

"Not really."

"Thinking about your family?"

Katniss' face twisted as she answered. "Would you still think I was a good person if I said no?"

Peeta chuckled and said, "Of course I would. What were you thinking about?"

"You. The arena." She looked away from him and said, "Everything that's happened over the past few days...earlier tonight."

Peeta wasn't sure what to do. Was she angry with him? The expression on her face was deadpan. She was inches away from him, but he didn't dare reach out to her for fear that she would pull away. If she had done that, he would be crushed. In a few short hours they were going to be in the arena and who knows what would happen. Peeta could be dead within seconds of the start of the Games. He couldn't let it end this way. He had to explain himself. He had to tell her why he had been acting so oddly the past few days. He looked around the roof and realized that even if they went to the wind chime area, the Capitol would still be able to see them. They'd see everything. He was surprised they had gotten away with their ruse so far considering he'd kissed her only a few nights ago. Then again, he did cover during his interview by saying he wasn't very good at hiding his feelings. Who cares, Peeta? He told himself. You've told all of

Panem that you love her. Isn't it time you said it to Katniss? He took her hand and led her to the wind chime area of the garden.

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Katniss could see the blood dripping from Peeta's hand onto his dinner plate from behind closed eyes. She pulled a pillow over her face and begged the memory of the night to go away. She no longer cared about District 2 and their reaction after the interview. They were going to try and kill her no matter what was said. Cinna had been right. Peeta helped Katniss with his interview. When they watched the recaps of it, Katniss was sure that she came off just as shallow as a resident of the Capitol. The only genuine part of her interview was the statement she made to Peeta about eating lamb stew with him and when she talked about Prim. Other than that, she looked like a silly girl in a pretty dress that someone else made for her. Strip all of that off of her and she was just a girl from the Seam. Peeta on the other hand was amazing. He was quick witted, handsome, charming and likable. When he spoke about being in love with Katniss, she felt like she wanted to die. She wanted nothing more than to make his dream come true. To have him win the Games and run into his arms and return his love for her, but that would never happen.

Katniss rolled onto her stomach and punched her pillow. Then punched it again...and again. Pretty soon she was pounding it into oblivion. The pillow had taken on many faces. Haymitch's for taking away the precious few days she and Peeta had together. Effie's for calling out Prim's and Peeta's name. President Snow for holding the Hunger Games and Peeta's mother. The witch! She deserved to be in the arena. Not Peeta. Then a thought struck Katniss. His mother wasn't the one that caused his cut tonight. That was you, Katniss. Her

stomach hurt. She always knew she had a temper, but she had never imagined she was capable of doing something like... Katniss had to push the image of Peeta falling to the ground out of her head. She got up and ran out of her room.

When she stepped onto the roof she saw the outline of Peeta's body, as he looked out into the streets of the Capitol. Katniss could hear all of the people in the street and she was disgusted. They were having a party...celebrating and it made her sick. She walked closer to Peeta and studied the expression on his face. He seemed to be in his own little world. She wondered what he was thinking about.

"They look like a flock of freakish birds."

She wanted to tell him that she was sorry. To apologize for the things that she had done and the way she had acted over the past few days. She understood now. She knew the moment she saw everyone's faces, after Portia had bandaged Peeta's hand. Haymitch had pretty much come right out and said it. He was trying to sell a television show to the sponsors. She and Peeta had to put on an act and the name of their show was titled, The Star Crossed Lovers of District 12. Katniss knew better. So did Peeta and she was sure the rest of their group did too, but none of them were letting on. So Katniss kept her distance from Peeta and kept their conversation friendly, but when he took her hand and guided her to the wind chime area, she knew that Peeta was about to tell her something that wasn't meant to be heard by anyone but her.

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Gale lied in bed staring at the ceiling. There was no way he could sleep tonight. In the morning Katniss would be standing on a platform

and running for her life. He'd stay home and watch it. He knew he couldn't be around a group of people when the gong sounded off and the blood bath at the Cornucopia started, least of all, Peeta's father. Past years of Hunger Games started filling his head. Years where the top scoring tributes were taken out within minutes of the start of the competition, which caused Gale to panic. Would Katniss try to make a run for it or would she go for a bow and arrow? The Gamemakers would definitely have a bow and arrow in the Cornucopia for her. Gale was sure that was how she got an eleven during her time with them. She probably hit every single target dead on. She probably split an arrow right down the middle. He smiled at the image of Katniss doing that.

He rolled to his side and looked out the sheer fabric that covered his window. The moon was bright. Gale stared at it and wondered if Katniss was thinking about him. Was she missing him like he was missing her? Or was she with Peeta? Gale's heart ached when he thought of her face after Peeta declared his love for her. At least Peeta confirmed what Gale had known all along, that Katniss never knew about Peeta's feelings for him. They were nothing more than acquaintances. Still, she knew about his feelings now, and that's what frightened Gale. Would Katniss let Peeta's declaration cloud her judgment while she was in the arena? Absolutely not. This he knew for a fact. There was no one Katniss loved more than her sister, Prim.

The moment Gale had left the baker, earlier in the evening, he knew that he couldn't keep up the normal routine that had taken place between them as of lately. Fortunately the baker said that he'd be sending one of his sons to Katniss' house with some food for a while. Gale assumed it was the baker's way of telling him, he didn't have to come back if he didn't want to. Or maybe the man just wanted to mourn the death of his son in peace. Gale didn't know. Frankly, he didn't care. He had never given Peeta Mellark much thought except to

think that he was a pampered little merchant boy from town. Now he's all Gale could think of.

Gale began to dissect every interaction he'd ever had with Peeta. He'd seen him in school. The girls talked about him a lot. They seemed to think he was cute and funny. He always had a crowd of friends around him. He was a wrestler. He must've been tough, Gale thought, because he would show up to school with the occasional bruise or cut on his face or arms. Gale remembered a bad burn he had seen once too, but he was a baker, so that had to come with the territory, right? Gale thought of his trades with Peeta's father. Had Peeta ever been there for those trades? Yes! The morning of the reaping. He was there. Gale was certain of it, because Peeta had mentioned it later when he saw him by the woods.

Gale sat upright in bed and mumbled to himself, "What were you doing by the woods, Peeta?" His mind starting racing back to that morning. He and Katniss were getting ready to leave, but she said that she had wanted some time alone. Gale wanted to wait outside of the fence for her, but she didn't want him to. Why not, Catnip? His eyes were whizzing back and forth across his moonlit bedroom. Why did you need to be alone? What couldn't I see? What were you hiding? He asked himself. Gale kept reaching back for the memory. He squeezed out of the space underneath the fence and came up short when he ran into Peeta just a few feet away. Gale was certain no one had been there. That the street was deserted, but Peeta had suddenly materialized out of nowhere. Had he been hiding? Gale began to shake his head as if telling himself, no. There was no way on earth the baker's kid could've hidden from him. What happened next? Gale racked his brain trying to remember. He and Peeta had struck up a conversation. Peeta had said hi to him. Hi. *Hi...* That's when Gale remembered what had been eating away at him since reaping day.

He could see Katniss' face as she stood in the crowd of teenage girls. They were waiting for Effie Trinket to take the stage. Gale was trying to send Katniss a reassuring look from across the square. Trying to let her know, in his own way, that things would be alright, but then her face turned soft. At first Gale thought the look was meant for him, but her eyes shifted away from him. Her lips formed the word, hi and when Gale turned to see who she was looking at he couldn't make out who it was, but then he saw the familiar curly blond hair and blue eyes. She was talking to Peeta Mellark.

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They stood precariously close to one another in the center of the rooftop garden. Moonlight spilled around them. There was a gentle breeze giving the night air a slight chill, but neither of them felt it. They both knew that this was it. This was the last time they'd have together outside of the arena. The last time they could speak to one another without someone listening to every word they said and they needed to make it count.

Katniss noticed the way the light accentuated Peeta's blond eyelashes. The way the ends of his hair flickered with the wind.

Peeta was breathless when he saw the light reflecting off of Katniss' eyes. He could make out her freckles. She only had a few, but they were sprinkled across the bridge of her nose and he adored them.

They weren't touching. They were just looking. Admiring.

Katniss broke the silence. "I'm sorry I hurt you." She lifted up his bandaged hand and placed a kiss above the cut then let it drop back down.

"It was an accident. I know you didn't mean it."

"I didn't. I would never hurt you." She hadn't meant to hurt him. She had just wanted him to look at her so she could see his face when she talked to him.

"I know that. Portia put some medicine on it. She said it'll be healed by morning."

"Good. Still...I'm sorry."

"I forgive you, Katniss." Peeta watched as she accepted his forgiveness and thought, that's one down. Just a couple more to go.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you what I was planning to do during my interview. Haymitch and I thought it would bring in more sponsors if I kept my feelings..."

Katniss didn't want him to risk anything by saying it out loud so she interrupted him. "That's okay. I know why you did it."

"Do you?"

"Yes." Because you want to protect me, she thought. Because all you've ever wanted to do was take care of me.

"I'm sorry, Katniss. Sorry that I wasted these past few days. That I gave away what precious time we had together."

"You had good reasons for your actions so...I forgive you, Peeta." She smiled softly into his eyes.

"You were great in your interview tonight, you know?"

"Not as good as you were."

"No, Katniss. When you talked about making that promise to Prim... That really made an impact on people." Peeta ducked his head down to her eye level and said, "On me." He waited and then said, "Just remember that tomorrow, okay?"

She nodded.

"When you're in the arena, you remember the promise you made to Prim and you'll win for sure. But..." Peeta stammered and tried to go on. "But...just in case...just in case you forget. I'm going to ask you to make me the same promise."

Katniss gave him a look of question. "Huh?"

"Promise me you'll try to win. For me. You'll try...no...no. You will win. You'll win. For me. Can you promise me that?"

It was time, Katniss realized. Time to face Peeta's death. She tried to take a breath, but no air would come.

Peeta gripped her upper arms and shook her a little. "I need you to do this for me. Say it. Say you'll win for me." His voice was soft, but urgent. "You can do this. We both know you can, so take a breath." He dropped his hands and watched her as she breathed in the night air. "And say the words."

Katniss was blinking a mile a minute. She knew once she said it out loud Peeta was as good as dead. "I...I promise." She gulped.

"You'll win. Say it."

"I promise I'll win." Katniss felt like one of the dummies that District 2 had thrown a spear into during training. She had just told Peeta that

he was as good as dead to her. She hung her head down and put her face in her hands.

"Hey. It's okay. It's okay." Peeta whispered to her. "We both knew this was going to happen." He rubbed his hands up and down her arms.

Katniss wanted to cry, but she didn't. She held back her tears for Peeta's sake. She'd wait until she was alone in her room to let them come. She lifted up her face to his and said, "Yes. We did."

When Peeta saw the strength she was displaying he felt a surge of pride rush through his veins. "That's my girl." He reached out and let her braid trail through his fingers before letting his hand fall to his side. "You were on fire long before Cinna ever took a match to you."

Katniss was moved by him. Peeta had been more than she had ever deserved. He was just a breath away. She was desperate to reach out and touch him. To kiss him.

The tension between them was growing stronger. They could feel themselves being pulled closer to one another. Peeta began to dip his head down as Katniss lifted herself up on her toes. When the gust of wind blew against them and caused the wind chimes to crash, they startled apart.

Katniss looked around at the flying chimes. When they settled back down and began to make their soft tinkling noises again she said, "I wish we had a place like this in the arena." She turned to Peeta. "A place where we could talk and no one could hear what we were saying."

"Maybe we should take up lip reading?" Peeta tried to make a joke, but Katniss just gave him a soft smile. He knew if they had stayed up there any longer they would be in trouble. They needed to leave

before temptation got to the best of them, but there was still something she needed to know. "Katniss, I have to tell you something."

"Okay."

"It's important."

Katniss saw the urgency on Peeta's face and said, "I'm listening."

"After you win and you come back here. You'll see the recap of the Games and...I'm not sure how they'll edit it or what you'll be seeing...or...or hearing...." Peeta didn't know how to tell her what the plan for the arena was without giving it away. "I guess what I'm saying is...I'm not going to let them change me."

Katniss didn't understand what Peeta was getting at. "You mean you won't kill anybody?"

"No." He shook his head. "No...I'm sure I will." He lifted an eyebrow and said, "I *know* I will, but...I'm not going to be a pawn in their Games, Katniss. I've got my own agenda. I'll be playing my own Game." He placed his hands on her upper arms and said, "The important thing to remember is that, no matter what I say...no matter what I do...It's all for you. Will you remember that?" He was nodding his head at her. "Everything I do in that arena is for you. You just have to remember that no matter what they play back during the recap. Okay?"

Katniss began to nod too. "Okay. I'll remember."

Peeta breathed a sigh of relief. "Good." He gave her forehead a quick kiss and said, "Good." He put his arm around her shoulder and told her. "Listen. It's getting late. We should get some sleep."

Katniss didn't want to go to sleep. She wanted to stay up on the roof with Peeta. What she really wanted was to go home to District 12 with him. To go back in time and let Peeta ask her mother's permission to date her. To tell the witch to go to hell. Maybe threaten her with a bow and arrow? She wanted more time, but she didn't have any. She was standing at her bedroom door and Peeta was saying goodnight.

"Goodnight, Katniss." He started to walk away. Katniss had to stop him.

"Peeta!" She called quietly as she took his hand. "Don't go."

Peeta walked as close as possible to her. Their noses were a breath apart. He looked around the hallway as if saying, 'they're watching....listening.' "Read my lips, Katniss." He was making reference to the joke he had made in the garden with the wind chimes. It was three words. Three little words..."Go to sleep." His lips moved, but barely a sound came out. Then he whispered, "I'll see *you* tomorrow."

Peeta watched her as she entered her bedroom. He listened as the latch on the door closed and his heart cracked in half. He knew he had given up his last chance to say, what he'd been dying to say to her, since he was five years old.

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Gale woke up before dawn and got dressed. He barely made a sound as he left his house and started walking down the streets of District 12. It was still dark outside, but it would be light soon. He had spent the entire night ripping apart the past several years of his life...of his friendship with Katniss. He had come to a conclusion sometime

around 3:00am. Katniss had been mentioning Peeta in conversations with Gale over the past few months, but it was just in passing. The thing that bothered Gale was that Katniss never talked about *anybody* at school. Well, she seemed to be talking about Madge and Delly lately too. All of them were kids from town. Katniss and Madge had been sort of friends for a while. Gale knew this. Katniss yelled at him last year for making fun of Madge when they were in the woods once. When it came right down to it, Gale didn't care. He didn't care who Katniss was friends with. She still spent her time with him. Still told him everything. They still spent every Sunday together, hunted together and hadn't she said she wanted to eat some kind of stew with him by her favorite tree? Gale had watched the recap of the interviews just to see what she had said. It was an oak tree. She wanted to eat lamb stew with him by an oak tree.

Gale checked to make sure there were no Peacekeepers around and lifted his hand up to the fence that separated District 12 from the woods. The coast was clear and the electricity wasn't on. He made his way through the rusted opening that ran from the top to the bottom of the fence. It wasn't as hidden as some of the other entrances, but at this time of day, there was no one around so he took his chances and went in.

He walked slowly, not caring if he scared any game away, today he wasn't hunting. When he found their spot he looked at the giant tree they often sat under and pulled off one of its leaves. He sunk to the ground and watched the sun rise over the horizon. He began carelessly picking at the maple leaf he had pulled and hoped that Katniss was in familiar surroundings.

Across the country twenty four tributes stood on their platforms listening to the sound of Claudius Templesmith, the voice of the

Hunger Games. "Ladies and Gentlemen, let the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games begin!"

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Katniss took little sips of water from the glass that Cinna had given her. The salty taste of blood filled her mouth. She had been gnawing on the inside of her cheek. One of many nervous habits she'd developed over the years. The flavor of blood reminded her of the cut on Peeta's hand. Was it okay? He had said that it would be healed by morning. Were the medicines at the Capitol that advanced? Thought after thought inundated her mind. Memories of him rushed through her. How long ago had she felt his touch? How were his hands? She hadn't noticed them when she felt his touch. She berated herself for not paying more attention.

The promise she had made to Prim...to Peeta, was weighing heavily on her shoulders. Why didn't she suggest that *he* be the victor of the Games? Peeta was much more deserving than she could ever be. He would take care of her family. He would make sure Prim was fed and clothed. Peeta would make sure they never wanted for anything. But Peeta would never allow Katniss to give her life for his. In her heart she knew that.

She conjured up the sound of Peeta's voice. "I love you, Katniss. I love you." She imagined his blue eyes looking into hers, as his lips covered hers.

The sound of Cinna's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Do you want to talk, Katniss?"

She didn't want to talk. She couldn't speak. Her head made a shaking motion, telling Cinna, no, but her hand reached out to his. Strength. She needed strength. Katniss felt Cinna's hands grip hers and squeeze.

Peeta squeezed my hand on Reaping Day, she remembered. She trailed the fingers of her free hand across her lips, bringing the memory of Peeta's kiss back one last time. Katniss jumped when she heard a voice announcing that it was time to take her place.

Her heart was racing. Her blood was pumping. Every fiber of her being was on edge. She was trembling with nerves as she took her place on the circular platform.

"Remember what Haymitch said. Run, find water. The rest will follow," said Cinna. "And remember this. I'm not allowed to bet, but if I could, my money would be on you."

"Truly?"

"Truly." She accepted the kiss Cinna placed on her forehead. "Good luck girl on fire."

She heard Peeta's words from the night before. "You were on fire long before Cinna took a match to you." She flashed her eyes to Cinna's. Her stare was filled with fear...panic...sheer terror.

The cylinder rose up around her and the platform began to rise. Katniss placed her hands on the tube that had encased her. There was nothing but darkness for several seconds. Then the tube that had surrounded her, started to lower as Katniss started to rise to her destination. The shock of sunlight blinded her for a few moments. She tried to rely on her other senses. There was a breeze. Fresh air. What

do you smell, Katniss? Pine! I smell Pine, but her thoughts were interrupted by the familiar voice of the Hunger Games.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, let the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games begin!"

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"Are you ready, Peeta?"

Peeta stood up and ran to Portia. "I didn't tell her." His voice was frantic.

"Didn't tell who?"

"Katniss. She was right there...and I..." Peeta kept rambling on and on like he was losing his mind. "I'm going to die and I'll never get the chance to say it...to let her know. Why didn't I tell her, Portia? Why didn't I tell her?" Peeta shook Portia by the upper arms.

"Peeta, you have to calm down. It's almost time to go." Portia handed him his shift and said, "Put this on. Quickly."

Peeta kept mumbling to himself as Portia watched. "Peeta you have to snap out of this."

"But I didn't say it."

"She knows, Peeta." Portia tried to reassure him. "You told her last night."

"No." Peeta stripped the last of his clothes off and threw them on the floor in disgust. "I told the sponsors. I didn't tell her. I never told her."

He pulled on the shift that Portia had handed him, as tears started to fill his eyes. "I never told *her*."

Portia looked around the room. She opened up his bedroom door and looked down the hall. "Come on."

"Where..."

"Shush!" She whispered to him. She held her fingers up over her lips before stepping into the hallway. She walked to the end of it and waved him foreword. Portia opened up Katniss' bedroom door and waved Peeta into the room. "You only have a minute. Hurry."

Peeta ran straight to Katniss who was standing at the end of her bed with a look of utter shock on her face. "Peet..." He stopped her words with his lips.

Peeta placed his hands on the sides of her face and his insides turned to putty when she did the same to him. "I love you, Katniss." He breathed the words into her mouth between the kiss. They were holding each other's gaze the entire time. "I love you. I love you..." Peeta kept confessing to her as he expressed his love in a kiss.

Katniss started to speak. "Peeta..."

"No." Peeta kissed her again. "Don't say anything."

"Why not?" She continued kissing him back.

"I don't think I could take it if you did." Peeta stroked her cheek and wrapped her braid around his hand. He kept kissing her and talking in between. "I had to tell you. I just needed you to know."

"I know, Peeta. I've always known." Katniss pulled his head closer to hers to deepen the kiss and spoke into his mouth. "I don't want you to die."

"I love you, Katniss."

"Peeta. We have to go." Portia was calling quietly from the doorway.

Peeta felt the silkiness of Katniss' hair and he gave her one last kiss. "I love you."

"Peeta," Katniss whispered hoarsely and held her hand out to him as he left her.

"Hurry, Peeta," Portia said as she ushered him out of the door. Portia gave Katniss a heartbroken look and shut the door.

Peeta wiped his eyes on his sleeve and said, "Thank you."

Portia swallowed hard and said, "We need to get to the roof before they send someone down."

Peeta nodded his head and they made their way to the rooftop just in the nick of time. The hovercraft had just appeared overhead.

Portia guided Peeta through the process of the morning's procedures. She watched as his tracker was placed inside of his arm. Traveled with him on the hovercraft to the catacombs beneath the arena. Urged him to eat as much as possible. Gave him as much information as she could when she saw the clothing that was provided for the tributes and tried to keep him calm.

"Remember Haymitch's instructions." Portia said in a reassuring tone.

"I know. I remember the plan." Peeta could feel his pulse pounding.

She held out a glass of water to him. "Drink some water."

"I can't." He was sure that he was about to lose all of the breakfast Portia had made him eat.

"It's almost time." Portia paused. "Peeta, I won't ask you if you're sure about this. I know you are. I just want to tell you what an honor it's been for me to know you."

Peeta stood and took Portia's hand. He was shaking, but he tried not to let her see. "Portia, the honor was mine." Peeta had no clue how he was going to get through the next few minutes. If he just knew what kind of arena he was going into. It was the not knowing that was the worst part. Not knowing what was coming.

Portia pulled him in for a hug and spoke into his ear. "You are a remarkable man. Your mother must be a wonderful woman to have raised such an inspiring young man."

Peeta shook his head in disbelief. "Wha...what did you say?"

"Your mother. I said she must be a wonderful woman." Portia pulled back and looked at Peeta as he began to laugh to himself.

Peeta squeezed her and said, "Thank you, Portia. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

A second ago Peeta had no clue how he was going to make it through the unknown and now he knew exactly how he would. Portia had told him how. His whole life had been an arena and his mother was the ultimate Career. He'd get through this the only way he knew how, by relying on *himself* and the training his mother had provided for him since he was a toddler.

He grabbed the glass of water Portia had been trying to get him to drink and downed it. Stepped onto the platform and waited for the tube to encase him. Everything went black and then there was light. Bright sunlight. Wind. The sound of leaves rustling all around him.

Peeta adjusted his eyes as he heard, "Ladies and Gentlemen, let the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games begin!"

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were Chapter 11: Welcome to the Careers, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Eleven: Welcome to the Careers

In this chapter, Peeta joins up with the Careers, which takes Katniss by surprise. Lots of POV's during the Games. Please remember this is based on the book, movie and my imagination. Thanks to A for a few suggestions and the beta.

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

Portia didn't know what to do with herself. Each stylist had the ability to watch the start of the Games from the launch room, the Capitol wanted to make sure everyone could enjoy the show, but she was shaking as though she, herself, had just stepped onto the cylinder and lifted into the arena. She couldn't bring herself to turn the television on. She threw open the door and stepped out into the hallway. She looked one way then the other, that's when she saw him. Cinna was standing in the middle of the corridor. "Cinna!" She called out.

He turned and slowly ran past the Peacekeepers that were placed as guards by each tribute's door, counting as he made his way to Portia. He stepped into her room and closed the door. "Five. They're five tributes apart." His breath was uneven. He made a gesture to the television set and said, "Turn it on."

Portia pushed the remote control with trembling fingers and they watched, arm in arm, as the clock counted down. The camera panned out so the viewers could make out each tribute's face, but Portia and Cinna were only interested in two faces.

Portia grabbed Cinna's arm. "What's he doing?" She took a deep breath of air and pushed it out of her lungs as she watched Peeta

slowly shaking his head. But Cinna couldn't answer. The gong had rung out and their tributes were running for their lives.

"Move! Katniss. Run!" Cinna willed her from his position below ground. Katniss was looking around as if deciding on what to do.

"Dear God!" Portia was shivering. Her eyes were searching the group for Peeta, but all she could see was blood. Children being slaughtered before her eyes. When she saw a small boy being slit across his stomach she turned her head into Cinna's shoulder and whispered into it. "This has to stop."

He put his hand on her head as if to protect her. "I know. I know," he choked out. He kept his head held high and his chin level to the ground as he watched Katniss struggle for a backpack. She never listens, he thought. And when the knife went flying through the air towards her head, he lifted his chin up that much higher. His girl truly was on fire. "They're safe." He turned to Portia. "They're safe."

Portia looked at the television screen to see for herself. "Where are they?"

"Peeta ran into the forest and Katniss," Cinna smiled to himself. "She got a hold of a backpack and a knife."

Portia's eyes lit up. "A knife?"

"Yes. The girl from District 2 threw it at her head, but Katniss blocked it with her backpack." Cinna started to laugh. A soft sad chuckle. He patted Portia's hand. "Let's go find Effie and Haymitch."

Portia nodded her head in agreement. For the time being their pair was still alive, but Portia knew that Peeta would be purposely stepping into the line of fire within a short span of time.

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The first thought that came to Peeta's mind, as he surveyed the arena, was a question he had asked Katniss when they were stuck in the elevator shaft. "What makes you happy, Katniss?" He was staring her happiness in the face. The woods! They were surrounded by a forest. Katniss had been living off of this type of land since she was eleven years old, so Peeta knew she'd have the upper hand when it came to surviving off of the terrain.

He looked at the clock, it started with sixty seconds and it was currently down to thirty. He scoped out the tributes to his right. She wasn't there. To his left...and there she was. Five tributes away, but what was she doing? Peeta knew that look she had on her face. He followed her eyes and saw what she was staring at. Right in the center of the Cornucopia was a bow and arrow. His eyes flashed to the clock...fifteen seconds...fourteen...back to Katniss. He willed her to look at him. His eyes went back to the clock...ten...nine...Katniss...eight...Katniss... Finally her eyes met his. He shook his head. Don't do it. Don't. He could see the flash of recognition in her eyes. You made me a promise, Katniss. The gong sounded and Peeta took off for the trees hoping that Katniss would follow.

His fight or flight response kicked in, just as he suspected it would, and Peeta flew. Haymitch was right; he wasn't up to the initial bloodbath that happened at the Cornucopia every year. Neither was Katniss. Peeta didn't bother with any of the supplies they had lying around to tempt the tributes. He knew he wouldn't need them. He'd get everything he needed later. Either that or he'd be dead. He ran until he

was sure that no one else was behind him, but he had to stay close enough to the Careers to carry out his and Haymitch's plan.

Effie wasn't kidding when she said this was dangerous, he thought. This first part was crucial. He had to find a place to hide out. Just until the early killings were over and then he could sneak back and see who was left. He saw a cluster of bushes a few yards away, there must've been over two dozen of them and he ducked inside. They were scratching at his skin, but hiding there was keeping him alive. He listened as two different times a tribute passed him by. They were alone and one was sniffing, so he knew they weren't Careers. They had somehow managed to escape, like him, but he couldn't take them out. He had no weapon. Nothing but his bare hands and as much as he wanted Katniss to win, Peeta just couldn't squeeze the life out of an innocent child's lungs. It was an inhumane way to die. So he kept his ground and waited to make his move.

Peeta went over Haymitch's plan in his head. He, Effie and Haymitch had been sitting in his room just a few nights ago talking it through.

"Listen, kid. The Careers like to hunt."

"I know that, Haymitch," said Peeta.

"*Everybody* knows that." Effie chimed in.

"But when they do...they usually leave somebody with their camp." Haymitch said with a conniving grin.

"You don't expect, Peeta to invade their camp?" Effie was mortified.

"No. No, Effie. This is good. Go on, Haymitch." Peeta encourage.

"Kid, how good are you at wrestling?"

"I'm good."

Haymitch made a face and said, "You came in second place."

"Only because I wanted to." Peeta confessed. "Trust me. If I had wanted to win, I would've."

"Think you can bring down a Career in hand to hand combat?"

"I don't know, but I'll die trying." Peeta and Haymitch chuckled. It was the only way to get through the twisted discussion they were having.

"I don't think that's very funny." Effie scolded. "You expect him to go into their camp with no weapon...no...anything?!"

"Yes." Haymitch started pacing back and forth around the room. "After the initial fighting ends, they usually want to go out and take down a few more tributes. See if anybody's hanging around. Get the numbers up high for the first day's body count."

"That depends on how many die at the Cornucopia Haymitch," Effie said.

"True. True." Haymitch stopped and said, "Let's say they don't go out that first day and hunt. Effie, do you ever remember a Games where the Careers just sat around and did nothing?"

"No. Not really."

"Right." Haymitch sat down and put his elbows on his knees. Peeta sat across from him and matched his pose. "Peeta, look...one of two things is going to happen. They're either going to search for tributes or water...or *something*. They never stay put on the first day. Hell, they never stay put. And if they do that, they tend to leave one or two people with the supplies. I *have* seen them leave no one with the

supplies, but if they do that, chances are they've set a trap. Don't go for it." Peeta just nodded his head taking the entire information in. "If you could sneak up on one of them and take 'em out."

"With no weapon," Effie mumbled.

"Grab a sharp rock! Make a weapon!" Haymitch turned on Effie. "He's got to do something!"

"I can do it. I can. Especially if there's only one of them," Peeta told them.

"If there's one and they've got a knife..." Haymitch looked at Peeta.

"All I've got to do is come up with it," Peeta repeated Katniss' words to him. "And I'll stand a chance."

"Exactly." Haymitch slapped him on the back.

"Okay. Let's say he does get rid of one or two Careers. How do you suppose he gets Katniss a bow and arrows? And how do you even know there *will* be a bow and arrows? *Hmmm?*" Effie asked in a prissy tone.

"There'll be a bow and arrows," Haymitch mimicked her. "She got an eleven. You think they're *not* going to show the viewing audience how she got that eleven?"

"Fine! Then how does he get it to her? How do you know a Career won't be walking around with it hanging off of their arm or something?" Effie snapped.

"Shoulder," Haymitch snapped back. "Geez, if you're going to *speak*, at least know what the hell you're talking about!"

"Whatever, Haymitch! All I'm saying is that there's no guarantee that Peeta will be able to get it to her!" Effie's voice was shrill.

"Effie's right," Peeta silenced their argument with his quiet comment. "I might be able to take out one or two of them, but then what?"

"Get what you can and...and..." Haymitch had no clue.

"And? What if they're using the bow and arrow on their hunt?" Peeta asked him.

"I'm sorry, Haymitch, but I just don't think this is going to work," said Effie. "We need to think of something else." She lifted her fingers to her temples and began rubbing. "My job would be a lot easier if I actually worked *for* the Careers," she mumbled under her breath.

Haymitch glared at her.

Peeta lifted the corner of his lips in a grin and shook his head at her. Then he raised his eyebrows. "If you can't beat 'em. Join 'em."

"What's that, kid?"

Peeta looked at Haymitch and said, "It's something Gale said to me. I think he just said it in passing, but...but...he said, 'if you can't beat 'em. Join 'em.'"

"Now wait a minute," Haymitch held up his hand and started to protest.

"You said it yourself, Haymitch. On the train. You said, 'you don't beat the Careers, unless you *are* a Career.' Well, I can become a Career!" Peeta stood up and grabbed his escort by the upper arms and pulled her into him. He placed a kiss on her cheek and said, "Effie, you're brilliant!"

"And how the hell are you going to pull that off?!" Haymitch snarled at him.

Peeta turned to him and said, "You mean we. How are we going to pull it off?"

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Gale wasn't sure how long the sun had been up. Minutes...hours... He hadn't paid attention. Time seemed to be standing still. He watched a squirrel climb up the tree he was sitting under. It stopped, looked down and scurried further up. Just like Catnip, he thought. Catnip, are you still alive? The pounding in his chest became brutal. He berated himself for not being there...not watching to see if she was still alive. He couldn't be in the arena, but the least he could do was support Katniss from home. He slapped the ground below him and ran.

The rusted slit in the fence he entered earlier that morning was the closest to his house, but it was also the most dangerous to exit from during the day. There were a few pine trees he could take cover under, but once he went past them, there was nothing but shrubbery and the fence that separated District 12 from the woods. Gale didn't care. He needed to know if Katniss was still alive.

Gale stood behind a pine tree, peering from side to side, trying to see if anyone was coming. When he thought it was safe he took off running to the fence. Just as he got to it he saw the flash of a white uniform. He froze. If the Peacekeeper caught him on the wrong side of the fence, Gale didn't know what would happen, but it was too late. The Capitol's guard had seen him. Gale tried to weigh his options. If he took off and ran into the woods, he could make it. He knew he

could survive. He had supplies hidden in the woods, snares, a bow and arrow, but he'd be leaving his family behind and there was no way Gale would leave them so the Capitol could take out *his* punishment on them. So he stood still and waited for the man to make his move. Gale wasn't sure what would happen until he noticed the red hair peeking out from underneath the Peacekeeper's helmet. It was Darius, one of his and Katniss' regular customers. The guard had deliberately turned his back to him so Gale could exit the wooded area. Gale squeezed through the fence and started to walk. If he had run, he was sure that he would look suspicious. He maintained a slow and steady pace. When he was certain he wasn't in any danger, he jogged...sprinted...ran as fast as his feet could take him. He threw the door to his house open to find his mother sitting on the sofa with his brothers and sister sitting on the floor around her, watching the Games on their old television set.

"Is she?"

"She's alive. She's in the woods," his mother informed him.

"Where's Peeta?" Gale ran and sat next to his mother.

"I don't know. He's in the woods too. They just keep showing the fighting at the Cornucopia. We haven't seen where the tributes are that made it out yet." His mother said.

"But you're sure she made it out?" Gale asked.

"Yes. They both did. Katniss got a few supplies too." His mother took his hand in hers and squeezed it reassuringly. "She's got a knife."

They sat and watched for the next twenty minutes as tribute by tribute was eliminated. The Careers had taken out almost everyone but a few stragglers. They were already starting to go through the spoils the

Capitol provided within the Cornucopia when the television screen split into three images. One was on a battle between a Career and a girl he was slowly torturing. Another located about a hundred and fifty feet away, had been on a different Career that Gale recognized as the boy from District 1 and a different boy that Gale couldn't place. The third screen went to Peeta as he made his way out of the bushes and slowly headed back towards the Cornucopia. He was ducking behind the large trees. Looking over his shoulder. Making his way towards the boy from District 4.

"What's he doing?" Gale turned to his mother. "He's going to get himself killed."

Hazelle gripped Gale's hand with both of hers and shook her head as if she was unable to answer.

Gale's younger brother, Rory, turned to him and said, "What do you care? That's the baker's son."

His mother hushed him as they continued to watch the show.

District 4 had the girl's arms pinned behind her back with one hand and he was holding a knife to her throat. "How do you want to die?" She was already bleeding from gashes that had been cut in her stomach, leg and her arms. When her injured leg gave out and she collapsed to the ground, District 4 laughed, rolled her over and then plunged the knife into her chest.

Peeta flew out from the trees and knocked District 4 to the ground. He had him on his back and they began rolling around in the dirt.

Gale's whole family began cheering.

"Like torturing little girls?" Peeta choked out as he got a strangle hold on District 4. He was answered with an elbow to the gut.

With each punch Peeta threw, Gale cheered. Every one that landed against Peeta's face, Gale winced. When the television screen turned into a wide shot, Gale knew Peeta was in trouble.

The boy from District 1 had killed his enemy and was now running towards Peeta and District 4.

"Come on, Peeta! Come on!" Gale called out. He was terrified the rest of the Careers were going to join District 1 and kill Peeta. A box appeared in the right hand corner of the television screen and now Gale had a close up of Peeta's fight. His eyes tried to focus on the entire scene.

Peeta had District 4 pinned to the ground, but he rolled off of him, got to his feet and pulled the knife out of the dead girl's body. Gale watched as Peeta flipped the knife around in one swift motion and sliced through the throat of District 4.

"Turn around! Turn around!" Gale was standing up and yelling at the television set. District 1 was only a few steps away. Peeta ducked just as the spear flew over his head. "Yes!" Gale shouted. He watched as Peeta quickly got District 1 in a choke hold and twisted his arm behind his back.

Peeta held the knife up to District 1's throat and pressed it against his flesh. "I wouldn't talk if I were you," he warned District 1. "My hand's a little twitchy after that fight."

Gale couldn't believe what he was seeing. Peeta Mellark, the baker's son, was about to kill another Career. Gale stood still, staring at the

television set. "Oh my God!" He turned to his mother with a huge smile on his face. "I can't believe this!"

He watched as Peeta spoke into District 1's ear. "Walk!"

Gale wasn't sure what was happening. Was Peeta going to torture him? Take him to the woods and finish him off there? He didn't care. Peeta was keeping his word to him. He was keeping Catnip safe.

"What's he doing?" Gale's sister asked.

No one answered. They all watched as Peeta walked towards the group of Careers, using District 1 as a human shield. Peeta stopped when he was about thirty feet away from them.

"Did you kill her yet?" Peeta called out.

Gale's heart jumped to his throat. "Wha..." He couldn't get any words out.

The Careers eyes shot up at the sound of Peeta's voice. One of them started to make a run for Peeta with weapons in hand, but the boy from District 2 stood in front of her and stopped her.

"What are you doing, Cato?" The girl yelled at him.

He gave her a menacing grin and said, "Leave Lover Boy to me." The girl started to push forward, as if to go after Peeta. "I'm serious. He's mine." Cato turned around and started to walk slowly towards Peeta. He called out to him, "Not yet!" When he got about ten feet away he said, "About time you got here."

Peeta looked at him and said, "Want to call your boy here off?" Peeta squeezed District 1 for good measure and chuckled as the kid made a groaning noise.

Gale wondered why Peeta was *talking* to this Cato person and not trying to kill him. Why he hadn't killed District 1 when he had the chance?

"Wha...what did he say?" Gale watched as the scene played out before him. His stomach was churning as he listened to Peeta betray Katniss and join the pack of Careers. This couldn't be happening. There had to be a reason for it. Peeta loved Katniss. Gale overheard his father say so. Then why was Peeta selling her out to the Careers?

Cato looked at Peeta's prisoner and said, "Back off, Marvel. He's with us."

Gale had known fear in his life. His father was killed when he was young and he'd been breaking the law and stealing from the Capitol for years just to put food on the table. The threat of starvation loomed over them on a daily basis. Just this morning, as he was sneaking out of the woods, he thought his life would be over, but none of that scared him as much as what he was watching play out before his eyes.

Peeta released Marvel from his hold and pushed him to the ground. He limped up to Cato, pointed at Marvel with his knife and said, "If he comes after me again, he's dead." Peeta limped towards the girl from District 2 and asked, "Got some water?" She held out a canteen and Peeta took a long swig then wiped his mouth off on his sleeve and said, "Thanks."

Gale's eyes filled with tears. He turned to Hazelle with questioning eyes, "Mom?" Gale listened to Peeta's conversation with the Careers. Rage...fury began to consume every fiber of his being.

Hazelle saw the expression morph on her son's face and knew that Peeta was safer in the arena than he would've been in her own living room.

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The closer Peeta got to the field of battle, the more his blood pumped through his veins. He prayed that no one would come into the woods. He was sure they'd be able to hear the thrumming of his heart through his chest. It was just twenty or so yards away.

He could make out some dead tributes from his position behind a giant pine tree. His eyes scanned the corpses for Katniss. He knew she wouldn't be there. Not after his silent message to her. She wouldn't have tried to risk the bloodbath for the bow and arrows.

He pulled his back up to a tree and sucked in his breath as one tribute laughed and tortured another tribute twenty feet away from him. They were just outside of the wooded area. It was the boy from District 4 and someone else. Peeta couldn't tell. He heard a girl cry out. Pleading for her life. The boy from District 4 just laughed and asked her how she wanted to die.

Peeta knew it wasn't Katniss, but it could've been. Any of these female tributes could've been someone else's Katniss. This thought got his blood to boil as he jumped out from his hiding spot and entered into a battle for his life with a Career.

Peeta had tackled him from behind just as District 4 had plunged the knife into the girl's chest, so the boy had no weapon, but Peeta knew he was strong. He had watched him wrestle the Capitol attendant during training.

Peeta had Four face down in the dirt, but he was quickly flipped over onto his back and they began to roll around in the soil as they each pushed the other's face away. They separated, jumped up, but Four wasn't quick enough and Peeta got him in a choke hold.

"Like torturing little girl's?" Peeta growled at him. He grunted as the elbow sent a sharp pain through his torso, but the pain didn't register. All Peeta kept thinking about was the girl that had her life snuffed out by this boy's hands.

District 4 turned and threw a punch at Peeta's jaw. Peeta threw one back and landed it right in the middle of the boy's face. Blood began pouring out of his nose, but Four never stopped. They began taking punches at one another. One after another until District 4 stepped back and rushed head first for Peeta's torso. Peeta stepped to his left and elbowed Four in the back. Peeta jumped on top of him, as he fell to the ground and pinned him to the dirt.

Peeta could hear the footsteps running towards him. He only had a few seconds to make a move. Peeta could make out the body from the corner of his eye and he knew he only had one shot. He rolled off of District 4, got to his feet. He reached out and yanked the knife from the dead girl's chest. In one swift motion, he twirled the knife around and slit the throat of District 4 just as he was about to swoop down on him.

There was no time to stop. Peeta knew someone was running up from behind. It had to be the boy that was in the other fight, he thought. And if that was the case...he had a spear! Peeta ducked down and watched as the weapon flew over his head and landed in the dirt several feet away.

The boy from District 1 ran straight towards Peeta, but years of wrestling taught him how to handle a situation such as this. When the

boy got close enough Peeta made a sweeping motion with his leg which caused District 1 to fall face first into the dirt. Peeta twisted one of his arms behind his back and held the knife to his throat.

"I wouldn't move if I were you. My hand's a little twitchy after that fight." Peeta growled into his ear. "Walk!" District 1 was choking and trying to free himself from being strangled. From having his throat slit, but Peeta had adrenaline and a hidden agenda on his side. He'd come this far and he wasn't about to stop now.

The closer he got to the group ahead of him, the more nervous he got, but he would be damned if he would let fear take him over.

The fighting at the Cornucopia had stopped. He was walking right into the center of the lion's den. Peeta drew comfort from the thought that if he was going to die, at least he would take down another Career with him.

He ducked his head behind District 1's in case one of the Careers decided to throw or shoot something at him. When he was close enough for them to hear, but far enough to run back into the woods, he called out, "Did you kill her yet?"

The girl from District 1 started to run towards him, but the boy from District 2 stopped her.

Peeta watched as he said something to her. She tried to come after Peeta again, but the boy from District 2 spoke again then made his way towards Peeta.

"Not yet!" District 2 called out as he was walking. He stopped and gave Peeta the once over and said, "About time you got here."

Peeta felt the boy in his arms scrambling. "Hey, Cato. Want to call your boy here off?" Peeta threw District 1 to the ground a few feet away from him and said, "Got a name? Or should I just call you One?" Peeta saw the kid staring at him with hatred in his eyes. Peeta stared back until he heard Cato's voice.

"Back off Marvel. He's with us."

Peeta heard a couple of female voices rising in the background, but his eyes stayed on Marvel's.

"What the hell, Cato?" Marvel called out. "What's going on?"

"Didn't your mentor tell you we had a strategy for finding the fire girl inside the arena?" Cato asked with a conniving look in his eyes.

"Yeah." Marvel's answer was hesitant.

Peeta flipped the knife around and jammed it into his belt. He jutted his chin, as if introducing himself and said, "I'm your strategy."

Marvel jumped up from the ground and rushed towards Peeta.

Peeta struggled with Marvel until he got both of Marvel's arms behind his back. Peeta pulled them up to their breaking point and said, "The deal was, I wouldn't kill you till Katniss was dead, and we all went our own way..." Peeta pulled Marvel's arms up a little higher. "...but I never said anything about breaking your arms."

Cato was laughing in the background. "Damn, Lover Boy. You were holding out during training weren't you?"

Once again, Peeta threw Marvel to the ground. He took the knife out of his belt and pointed it at Marvel, walked up to Cato and said, "If he

comes after me again, he's dead." He left the pair and walked to the Cornucopia.

This was it. He knew his actions right now would make or break him. He calmly walked up to the female tribute from District 2 and said, "Got some water?" After taking a drink from her canteen, he wiped his mouth and said, "Thanks." He handed the bottle back and said, "You're Clove, right?"

She glared at him and said, "Yeah."

Peeta could hear Marvel and Cato having an argument in the background, but he ignored it. He turned to the girl from District 1 and said, "Peeta."

She gave Clove a questioning look then said, "Glimmer."

Cato and Marvel joined the group around the Cornucopia just as Glimmer asked, "Can somebody please explain to me why Lover Boy here is still breathing?"

Peeta laughed a little and said, "Lover Boy? Funny." He looked at the group, still unsure if they were going to kill him or not, and waited for Cato to answer.

"Simple. We needed to track fire girl, and Lover Boy here knows her secrets." Cato slapped Peeta on the back and said, "Don't ya Lover Boy?"

"That's why I'm here," Peeta answered. In the back of his mind he was thinking, I know all of her secrets and that's why you'll never catch her.

"You mean to tell me, he's going to help us kill off the girl he's been in love with his whole life?" Glimmer asked with a mocking tone in her voice.

Peeta looked at her and rolled his eyes, "Don't tell me you fell for that crap?" Glimmer and Marvel looked at him. "Geez, you guys are as gullible as her." He looked around and said, "So...what's next?"

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Are you alive, Peeta? Are you alive, Peeta? Katniss had taken up a steady jog and she matched each syllable to the question that had been plaguing her to each footfall she had been taking. She stopped three times. Once right outside of the arena. She took a quick look around to see if he was anywhere in her view. When she didn't see him, she started running again, reminding herself that she had made him a promise to win the Games and so far she hadn't been doing very well with keeping her word.

Haymitch told her not to go towards the Cornucopia and if Peeta hadn't stopped her, that's exactly what she, would've done. "Run. Find water." Her mentor had given her simple instructions, but Katniss decided to try and pick up some supplies on the way. Oh well, she thought, at least I got a backpack and a knife. That was thrown at your head! She shook the thought from her memory and continued at a steady pace through the forest.

The second time she stopped was when she saw a rabbit. She knew there had to be water somewhere other than the lake that had been next to the Cornucopia, because the rabbit had to drink somehow. So she continued on her journey, but she no longer had to jog. She felt safe enough to walk. She looked at the sky with the hopes that the

Gamemakers hadn't created a sun that traveled in an odd direction. They were notorious for taking basic things and altering them. She had once seen an arena with three moons and two suns. If her calculations were correct, she was going west.

The third time she stopped was when she heard the booming of the cannon announcing the deaths of the tributes. There were thirteen in all. That meant there were eleven left. More than half of them were gone. Was Peeta one of them? She closed her eyes and pictured his face as he left her this morning. She missed him. She felt so alone without him near. The past few days they had spent so much time working side by side training for the arena. Maybe Peeta hadn't been as affectionate as he normally would've been, but just his presence brought comfort to her.

The burning sensation of tears started in the back of her eyes, but she pushed them away, she couldn't afford tears. She hadn't had a drink of water since before she entered the arena plus there were the viewers to consider. Instead she closed her eyes and allowed herself a few seconds of grief. To anyone that was watching, it would look like she was just trying to catch her breath after a long day's travel, but Katniss knew who and what her moment of solitude was for. She opened her eyes and looked around, knowing that cameras would be focused on the tributes that had made their way to safety, which meant that the whole country was probably watching her right now. Prim was probably watching her and she had made her sister a promise. Made Peeta a promise and she would do her best to keep them. She would appear to be strong at any cost.

The weight of her backpack had become overwhelming. She pulled it off and started going through it. She was grateful when she saw its contents, knowing that she could survive with the items that were provided within. A sleeping bag, matches, a bottle of iodine, a pair of

sunglasses, some crackers and some dried beef strips. Unfortunately, the canteen that had been inside was empty and her need for water was becoming urgent.

She made a mental checklist of things she needed to do. Find water. That was first and foremost. Find food. Find a place to rest for the night.

Katniss had been going through the day's events in her head as she waited for the night sky to light up with the images of the deceased. He told you he loved you. You have to find water. You're still alive. *He* could be dead.

Though she was secure and hidden within the branches of a willow tree, her pulse was still pounding with fear. Partly because she was parched, but mostly because the thought of Peeta's body being shipped back to the witch in a pine box, made her ache. She closed her eyes and waited. Waited. When the sound of Panem's anthem filled the air, Katniss peered out from her sleeping bag and looked up to the sky.

She watched as the faces and District numbers of her fellow tributes were shown. The first one was the girl from District 3, so she knew that the Careers had survived. When she saw the image of the boy from District 4 she said a silent thank you to whoever took him out. The memory of him flipping around the Capitol's attendant can now be put to rest. She continued watching...hoping. The sky went black after the girl from District 10 and a smile crept up onto Katniss face.

"You're alive," she whispered. She blew out a breath and smiled once again. In the back of her mind she was thinking, I bet the cameras on focused on both of the Star Crossed Lovers right now, so she gave them something to see. She peeked out of her sleeping bag far enough for a camera to pick up, looked up at the moon and

whispered, "Goodnight, Peeta." She ducked her head back into her sleeping bag and the smile on her face slowly disappeared.

She was completely hidden from the world behind the confines of her sleeping bag. She knew she was being sought out by other tributes...by the Careers. They were notorious for hunting. Her mother and sister were in District 12 watching her fight for her life. Her body was starting to show signs of dehydration and worst of all she hurt. There was a physical pain like none she had ever felt before and it had nothing to do with the lack of food or water and everything to do with missing Peeta. She'd have given anything to see him just one more time. To know that he was alright. Her eyelids began to droop as her mind...her heart willed him to find her. Her lips moved, 'I'm here, Peeta. I'm here.' Somewhere in the arena, she was sure that he knew she had sent him a silent message meant just for him.

Katniss woke up to the familiar sound of snapping twigs. She opened her sleeping bag enough to peer through it and saw the stream of smoke going straight into the air. As she closed the bag back up, she quietly called the tribute that had started a fire a few choice words for putting both of their lives in danger. Fortunately, Katniss wasn't sitting on the ground around it. She was hiding deep within the branches of a willow tree. She closed her eyes and tried to let sleep come, in the hopes that nothing other than sleep would make its way to her.

Her eyes flew opened at the sound of screams. Taunting? Was someone laughing? She didn't know. Katniss couldn't make out what was going on, and then she heard them. The Careers. They were hunting in a pack and had obviously found Katniss' neighbor. She knew she was safe as long as she stayed hidden within the tree, but then she heard them fighting over whether or not they heard the cannon. Katniss knew that a cannon hadn't shot out, the entire arena would've heard it, but this group of idiots was actually fighting over

whether or not the girl was still alive. The cannon didn't fire, you fools! She thought to herself as they moved closer to her hiding place. They were too close for Katniss' comfort, but moving wasn't an option. Had she stepped out of her tree she'd be dead.

Katniss tried to count out how many tributes were below her.

She heard the arrogant voice of the boy from District 2. There were a couple of girls; Katniss figured it had to be the other two Careers and then two more male voices. Two? She thought. District 4 had been killed earlier in the day, so who else was with the Careers? Then she heard him. Peeta. He was the fifth voice, but why was he with the Careers? Her mind began to race as her heart matched its pace.

Peeta's words from the night before rushed into her head. "I've got my *own* agenda. I'll be playing my *own* Game."

Katniss' eyes flew open as she realized what Game Peeta was playing and who he was playing it with.

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Each district's team was provided a private suite, during the Games, that could be used until the end of the Games or until the tributes from their district expired. This allowed their mentor access to the Gamemaker's station for dispersing gifts from sponsors, yet was a short elevator ride to the twenty-four hour a day party the Capitol threw during the Games. It was customary for each member of the team to frequent the party to meet potential sponsors. After the initial fighting was done, most of the mentors pounced on the sponsors immediately, but the team from District 12 had remained behind

closed doors. They knew there would be too many questions and it wasn't time to answer them yet. Those answers would come shortly.

Effie sat in their private suite, perched at the end of her seat, watching the television screen like a hawk. The last of the dead tributes had been removed and they were all eagerly awaiting for Peeta's image to fill the screen once again. "They're back," she called out.

Haymitch, Cinna and Portia turned from their conversation and took the remaining seats around the viewing area.

"I don't get it...you're saying you didn't plan it?" Glimmer asked Peeta.

The Careers walked to the Cornucopia and sat around it.

"Not at first." Peeta shrugged. "I mean...I didn't come into the Games thinking, I'll get Katniss to fall in love with me, but after she kissed me..."

"She kissed you?!" Marvel interrupted him.

Peeta rolled his eyes in disgust and said, "I know, right? It was after the Tribute Parade. Guess she was excited that we had a good showing or something."

"So she kissed you? Oh my God!" Glimmer laughed.

Peeta put a grin on his face and said, "That's when I thought, okay...why not? Might help to have an ally in the arena, so I started talking to her. Following her around during training..."

Cato had an evil smile on his face. "And she just kept falling for it?"

"You saw her," said Clove. "I mean...she didn't look very smart to me. Can she even read?"

They all laughed.

"Barely," said Peeta.

Their laughter got louder.

"What I don't get is why you said you were in love with her," Glimmer gave Peeta a look like she wasn't buying his story.

"Glimmer, if you were from my District and you got an eleven, I'd proclaim my love for you on national television too," Peeta wiggled his eyebrows and gave her a mischievous smile as the rest of the group laughed.

"So when his mentor suggested an alliance, I thought...why not? Couldn't hurt to get an upper hand in the Games and if he's lying to us...we just kill him." Cato stood up and said, "Anybody hungry? We should eat before we head out."

Cinna turned away from the television screen and said, "Haymitch, you should get ready. They'll be calling you soon."

"You think?" Haymitch grinned at him.

Portia kept her eyes on the television set and watched as Peeta walked up to the bow and arrows that was lying amongst the bounty of weapons in the Cornucopia and casually leaned his hand against them.

"Any good with these?" Glimmer asked.

Peeta shook his head and said, "District 12, remember? Coal mining." He started picking through the other items.

"Thought you were a baker?" Glimmer walked around him as she picked up the bow.

"I am and last time I checked, we didn't have to shoot a loaf of bread with an arrow before eating it." Peeta smiled at her. "I noticed you during training. You were pretty good at shooting one of those," he gestured to the bow and arrows then picked up a machete. "Is it hard to learn?"

"Not really," Glimmer took an arrow out and twirled it around in her fingers. "What about the girl on fire?"

"A bow and arrow? Katniss?" Peeta chuckled. "Not likely. She and her family are healers."

Effie turned her attention away from the television screen towards Portia. "Now the Gamemakers know."

"I think that's my signal," said Haymitch. He stood up and walked into the bathroom to freshen up. By the time he got out, there was an attendant waiting for him with a message. Haymitch opened it up and looked around the room at the rest of the team and announced, "Well. Well. Well. What have we here? Looks like I've been invited to do an interview with Caesar Flickerman."

The team from District 12 prepared to leave their suite.

Effie straightened out the bright pink hat that matched her shoes, lipstick and gloves.

Cinna watched as Portia straightened out Haymitch's bowtie and when they were finished. Haymitch said, "Let's go."

"Wait!" Effie called out. She looked at Haymitch with accusatory eyes and said, "How much have you had to drink today?"

"Who died and made you my mother?" Haymitch asked her with a distorted face.

"Answer me, Haymitch!"

"Two glasses, okay? I had a couple of shots after the start of the show. Is that okay with you, your majesty?"

Effie's lips puckered as though she had just bit into something sour. She walked to the bar, poured a glass of whiskey and handed it to Haymitch. "Drink this." Cinna and Portia's eyes looked like saucers at the escort's suggestion. "The last thing we need is a mentor with a case of the tremors on national television."

Haymitch grinned at her and swallowed the drink in one shot.

Effie took the glass from his hand and said, "Don't think this means I like you." She slammed the empty glass down on the nearest table.

Haymitch raised an eyebrow and said, "The feeling's mutual, sweetheart."

Haymitch made his way to meet with Caesar as the other three walked into the party of the year.

"Our seats are over there," Effie escorted Cinna and Portia to the table reserved for District 12.

As they sat Cinna said, "Remember...let them come to us."

They ordered some refreshments and watched the various television screens that were set up throughout the festivities.

"Effie!"

"That didn't take long," Portia said under her breath.

"Carter, darling." Effie stayed in her seat as one of the lucrative sponsors made his way to their table. She held out her gloved hands to his. "You know Cinna and Portia, our stylists."

"Yes. Lovely to see you again. Made quite an entrance for your first year in the Games." The sponsor made a bit of small talk then turned his attention back to Effie. "Peeta seems to have made some new friends, I see."

Effie smiled at him and said, "Has he?"

"Everyone's talking about it. He had us *all* fooled." The sponsor told her.

"Oh, I wouldn't be too sure about that." Effie said mysteriously.

One by one people gathered around their table, peppering them with questions, but none of the questions were answered. By the time Haymitch and Caesar's interview came onto the screen, everyone at the party was desperate for an explanation.

Every television screen had been split into three different scenes. On one the side viewers could see what the Careers were doing around the Cornucopia. On another side, the camera was following Katniss as she walked through the woods and in the center screen were Caesar Flickerman and Haymitch.

"Here we go," Cinna said behind his glass as he took a sip.

Portia, Effie and Cinna's eyes met as they watched the screen. The party guests, who had been laughing and vivacious only seconds

before, were now hushing one another. The sound of someone clearing their throat echoed through the room just as Caesar began.

"So, Haymitch," Caesar started. "It was just last night that Peeta Mellark sat in *that very chair* and proclaimed his love for his fellow tribute, Katniss Everdeen."

Haymitch nodded his head as though agreeing with Caesar.

"And now," Caesar continued. "He seems to be completely contradicting himself." Caesar paused, looked at the camera and then back at Haymitch. "Can you explain?"

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"Isn't that Haymitch?" Gale heard his brother's question from another room.

He could no longer watch as Peeta mocked Katniss on national television, but he didn't want to leave for fear that something would happen to her. He dropped the laundry he was helping his mother with on the kitchen table and ran to see what was happening. "What's going on?" Gale asked his little brother.

"Don't know. They just started." Rory's eyes were glued to the TV.

"So, Haymitch. It was just last night that Peeta Mellark sat in *that very chair* and proclaimed his love for his fellow tribute, Katniss Everdeen. And now he seems to be completely contradicting himself." Gale watched as Caesar looked into the camera then back at Haymitch. "Can you explain?"

Haymitch sat back in his chair and gave Caesar a cocky grin. "Now why would I give away our district's strategies for the Games?"

"So, you're saying Peeta is playing out some sort of strategic maneuver?" Caesar asked.

"Could be..." Haymitch wasn't giving anything away. "Only time will tell."

"Haymitch," Caesar playfully smacked at his leg. "The suspense is killing us. Isn't there anything you can tell us?"

"Sure." Haymitch leaned forward in his chair and said, "Peeta's a smart kid."

"True. True." Agreed Caesar.

"And we all know that Katniss is a...spitfire." Haymitch and Caesar both chuckled. "Great girl...courageous, beautiful... She's got something special. Something..." Haymitch looked at the camera and said, "Well, hell. I don't have to tell all of you how great she is. She scored an eleven!"

"Yes she did!" Caesar said with a gleam in his eyes. He leaned back in his chair and paused before asking, "Are you saying that Peeta's new alliance with District 1 and District 2 might have something to do with Katniss' training score?"

"All I'm saying is that the Gamemakers gave her that score for a reason and Peeta is just giving the whole country what they want."

"And what does Peeta *think* they want?"

"To find out exactly how a little girl from District 12 got an eleven." Haymitch sat back in his chair as though he were the most relaxed

person on earth. "Now all we have to do is sit back and enjoy the show."

Caesar turned to the camera and said, "I don't know about you folks, but I'm intrigued." He shook Haymitch's hand and said, "Haymitch Abernathy, thank you for your time."

Haymitch shook Caesar's hand and said, "My pleasure."

With that, the screen went back to two separate scenes. Katniss and Peeta. Both on different sides of the arena. One searching for water. One sitting around a camp, drinking water and washing the blood off of his hands in it.

Gale turned to Rory and said, "What happened before Haymitch came on? Did I miss something?" Gale wondered if Peeta was really a part of the Careers or if he was just trying to get his hands on the bow and arrows for Katniss like Haymitch hinted at.

"You didn't miss much," Rory answered. "Peeta was talking to that Glimmer girl for a little while and then they all ate."

"Glimmer?" Gale had to think for a second. "The girl from District 1?"

"Yeah," Rory looked at his brother. "Seriously. You didn't miss much of anything."

"What'd they talk about?" Gale asked him.

Rory looked down and said, "Weapons and stuff. It was actually kind of weird."

"Why was it weird?" Gale's heart was starting to race.

"Didn't you say that you and Katniss sold squirrels to the baker?" Rory asked.

"Yeah, why?"

"Because when that Glimmer girl asked Peeta if Katniss could shoot a bow and arrow he told her no. Said she was a healer." Rory stood up from the floor and started to walk away. "Maybe he doesn't know about the trades or something." He shrugged his shoulders.

Gale stared at the image of Peeta refilling water canisters on the television screen. There were multiple little boxes on the TV showing every tribute and their location in the arena. Peeta knew Katniss could shoot a bow and arrow. Everybody in their district knew. Gale's stomach fluttered with excitement. Peeta had joined the Careers to protect Katniss. Gale sat on the sofa, laid his head back and closed his eyes. My God, he thought. Peeta Mellark. The baker's son. I couldn't have picked a better tribute partner for Katniss. Including myself.

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"What a buffoon! Oh I'm cold," Clove clutched her arms and pretended to shiver. "I'm going to light a fire. No one will see it." Her voice was mocking and calculated.

The group of Careers laughed. The female tribute from District 8 was being thrown from Cato to Peeta to Marvel.

"Did you think we wouldn't see the smoke, Eight?" Cato asked.

"Please. Please don't kill me. I'm only fifteen. I have a family." The girl from District 8 was pleading for her life. Peeta's stomach was turning as he took hold of her arms and threw her towards Marvel.

"Sorry." Marvel made a deep slash into her right arm. "That's not how we play."

The sound of the girl's cries had Peeta wishing he could kill every one of the Careers and save this girl from what she was about to go through, but he couldn't. He kept his face void of expression and watched as Marvel plunged the knife into the girl's stomach and ripped open a gash that caused her blood to pour out of her. Peeta joined in when the Careers started to cheer. He griped when they complained about her lack of supplies and the entire time he silently mourned the murder of the strange girl that had been trying to stay warm by lighting a fire. She deserved a better death. She didn't deserve to suffer.

As they were walking away Glimmer asked, "Shouldn't we have heard a cannon by now?"

"I'd say yes. Nothing to prevent them from going in immediately," Cato answered.

"Unless she isn't dead," Clove glared at Marvel.

"She's dead. I stuck her myself."

"Then where's the cannon?" Clove turned on her heels and stared at Marvel.

"Someone should go back." Glimmer suggested.

Peeta listened to them arguing. They were fighting over whether or not the girl was dead. It made him sick. If she had been dead a cannon

would've shot out. This thought brought him to his senses. The girl was bleeding to death. Lying in a pool of her own blood and dying a painful death and chances were that her family was at home watching. "We're wasting time!" He screamed. "I'll go finish her and let's move on!"

He turned and jogged back to the girl. He found her clutching her insides, which were now seeping out of the cut Marvel had caused. Peeta rushed to her side and saw the terror in her eyes. She began to claw at the ground, trying to escape Peeta, but she couldn't scream. Cato had cut her throat, but not deep enough to cause her to die. The sight of her made Peeta want to wretch.

"My God," he choked out. "Shhh. Shhh." He lifted her head and placed it in his lap. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He stroked her hair. He gulped as he told her, "I'll make it quick. You won't suffer anymore." The girl's eyes met his. They were full of tears. "Close your eyes." His voice was soft and tender. "You're going home now. You're going to be with your family. They're waiting for you." He watched as she closed her eyes. Peeta held the knife in his hand. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry." He slit her throat. He swallowed hard and fought back the tears that had been building up since they had come upon her. He laid her head down on the ground and listened as the cannon fired.

He started to walk back to the group of Careers, working up the courage to face them again, but he was tempted to run. Just run and hide from the killers. He didn't know how much more he could take. He stopped and leaned his back against a tree, trying to focus his mind on the agenda, but he had just murdered an innocent girl and as much as he didn't want the Capitol to change him, he knew that they just did. He placed his hand against the bark and felt something foreign. Peeta wasn't sure if he had just walked into a trap or not, so he moved his hand slowly across the wire that was strung from the

tree. When he saw the rabbit trapped in the snare, he knew what he had found.

"Katniss?" He whispered. He looked all around to make sure there were no Careers in listening range. "Are you here?" But something inside of him knew that she wasn't. She was too smart for that. He had to remind himself of something, but he couldn't remember what it was. Katniss had told him something during training. Something important. His eyes flew open as he remembered.

"If you find one of my snares, Peeta. Just head west. You'll run smack into me."

"West..." Peeta looked around trying to remember which way the sun had set. He whispered, "You head west after setting your snares. Which way is west?" He turned from side to side until he remembered where the sun had gone down that day. When he figured it out a smile crept up on his face. He was in Games mode again.

Haymitch's instructions leapt into his head. "The first sign of Katniss you find make sure you try to give the audience a little sign that you're throwing the Careers off of her track. We'll be planting questions in their heads while you're in there. Making people wonder if you're with the Careers or if you and Katniss had a plan prior to entering the arena, so it's important for you to let the audience in on it as soon as you can. We don't want them to hate you kid."

Peeta touched Katniss' snare. He knew that the cameras were focused on him. He looked around to make sure there were no Careers around. He lifted the snare and showed the hanging rabbit to the viewing audience and whispered, "Don't worry, Katniss. They won't find you. I swear it." Before leaving the tree he mouthed the words, 'I love you, Katniss.'

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were Chapter 12: Whispers in the Wind, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Twelve: Whispers in the Wind

I'd like to say thank you to all of you who have left such wonderful and helpful comments. I appreciate them. I'd also like to give a big thank you to the wonderful person who is currently translating one of my stories, Road to Recovery, to Spanish so

more people can read it. Talk about being flattered! Thank YOU! A, you da bomb! It's amazing how many mistakes A can find so be grateful for my beta reader and now... How about some good old fashioned romance?

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

The initial alarm of hearing Peeta's voice with the Careers had caused Katniss to slip from her precarious perch in the willow tree. She was now hanging upside down from it. She was grateful that she had belted herself to the branch. Her heart was palpitating. Peeta had joined forces with the Careers. Her Peeta. She could make out his face as he headed back to finish off the girl the Careers had been fighting over. Katniss was lightheaded...in shock. She wanted to jump out of the tree and scream at him, but that would kill them both. His words echoed through her mind.

"No matter what I say...no matter what I do...it's all for you."

Peeta, she thought, you're going to get yourself killed. But that had been the plan all along and Katniss knew it.

"Why don't we just kill him now and get it over with?" Katniss' ears snapped to attention. They wanted to kill Peeta now!

"Let him tag along. What's the harm? And he's handy with that knife. Besides, he's our best chance of finding her." Katniss bit her lip and thought, no he's my best chance of escaping you.

"You think she bought into that sappy romance stuff?"

"You did." She heard the boy laugh. "She seemed pretty simpleminded to me. Every time I think about her spinning around in that dress, I want to puke."

"Wish we knew how she got that eleven." I'd be happy to show you, thought Katniss.

"Bet you Lover Boy knows." Oh he knows all right, Katniss' eyes were lighting up.

"Was she dead?"

"No, but she is now." The sound of Peeta's voice sent Katniss' heart to her throat. "But I did find something interesting out there."

"What?" The boy asked.

"Some snares." Katniss' eyes opened wide. "They're empty, but they're hers. They're Katniss'."

Katniss listened to the group as they began congratulating each other on Peeta's success.

"She's got to be around here somewhere." One of the girls said.

"Doubt it," Peeta said.

"Why? What do you know, Lover Boy?" One of the boys asked.

"We need to go east. During training she told me whenever she set up her snares she had a routine she followed. She kept the sun at her back and traveled east gathering plants and stuff." Katniss grinned as she listened to Peeta tell them the exact opposite of what she told him during training. "She even told me if I found her snares, all I'd have to do is go east and I'd run smack into her."

"Good going, Lover Boy." One of the boys said. "Come on. Let's go."

Katniss heard the rumbling noise the moment the group headed out of earshot. The Capitol had sent in a hovercraft to remove the body of the dead girl. The second it was gone she made her way out of the tree and packed up her gear, knowing very well that there were cameras on her at that very moment. She wriggled her eyebrows, winked in the direction she thought Peeta had gone in and headed towards her snares. When she got there she held up the rabbit for all the viewing audience to see. She wanted to let them know that Peeta had misled the Careers by telling them her snares were empty.

Her heart swelled with joy at the thought of him. He had found her. Somehow she knew he would, but the feeling quickly dissipated by the need to survive. Her mind began to race, she can't start a fire to cook the rabbit, but she didn't have to. Her now deceased neighbor already had. She ran to the girl's hot coals, skinned, cleaned and cooked the rabbit then headed west again.

As she was walking thoughts of Peeta risking his life with the Careers gave her feelings of guilt. She had to push them aside. Peeta wanted her to win. She swore to him that she would and now that she knew the depths to which he was willing to go for her survival, she wasn't going to let him down. On occasion she'd look over her shoulder in the direction that Peeta went. The further she traveled the more she could feel his distance.

The sun began to rise and Katniss heard the birds calling out. When she blinked she couldn't help but notice her eyelids sticking to her eyes. She was getting dehydrated. She questioned herself as the day wore on. Did she make the right choice by going into the valley? Was the lake by the Cornucopia the only source of water in the arena? Would her death be caused by lack of water and not at the hands of another tribute? Had Peeta put his life in jeopardy for nothing?

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"Yes!" Haymitch made a fist and gave his arm a little pump. "That was perfect, sweetheart!"

"He was great too," Effie said.

"They *both* were." Haymitch stood up and poured himself a drink then set it back down and turned to Effie. "The sponsors are going to love this."

"Yes, but..." Effie had a worried expression on her face. "Haymitch, they're already talking about killing him and he's no closer to getting her that bow and arrow."

"Oh, he will. He'll get it to her." Haymitch downed the glass and said, "I'm going to bed. Who's got the first watch?"

"I do." Effie told him.

"Okay. Wake me up in four hours." Haymitch headed to his room. "Oh and Effie...if anything happens..."

"Don't worry. I'll get you." Effie sat and stared at the television screen watching as Katniss and Peeta headed two different directions in the arena. For four hours she watched as Katniss slowly began to deteriorate before her eyes. Peeta's group had provisions, but Katniss hadn't had anything to drink since the start of the Games.

Messages were being sent to Haymitch from various patrons at the party, but he had made it clear unless it was a serious inquiry about sponsoring Katniss and Peeta, Haymitch wasn't about to become the

local gossip. When Effie noticed the clock coming up on the four hour mark she sent for Haymitch.

"Anything happen?" Haymitch asked her.

"Yes. Katniss is dying of thirst." Effie gave him a dirty look. "You also got several messages from various guests about our pair."

"Good. Good." Haymitch looked over the messages that he'd been sent and said, "Effie, I think it's time to get our girl some sponsors."

Effie let out a sigh of relief. "I'll call Cinna. He's got the next watch. Then I'll go with you to..."

"No, Effie."

She turned to him and said, "No? No you don't want me to call Cinna? Do you really expect me to sit in here and watch them twenty four hours a day?"

"No. Call Cinna. Let him take the next four hours. I want you to get some rest."

"I can rest when we get back."

"Effie, signing up sponsors is my job. Not yours." Haymitch gave the escort a look and said, "You did good today Effie. Now go get some sleep. We all need to be on top of our game."

She got in six hours of sleep before heading back to their suite to see Cinna and Portia watching the television screen. Katniss was still walking, only now her movements were slower. Her head was hanging down further and she looked exhausted. "What's happened?" Effie asked.

"Not much," Portia answered. "Peeta's back at camp. They're rotating two at a time every two hours so they can each get some sleep."

"Has Katniss found some water yet?" Effie walked to the bar to pour herself a cup of coffee.

"No," Cinna answered with pain in his voice.

Effie lifted the cup to her lips then placed it back down on the table. Guilt washed over her. "Where's Haymitch? Hasn't he gotten any sponsors for her yet?"

"Yes. There's a few, but..." Cinna turned to Portia and gave her a look.

"But what?" Effie demanded.

"I'm not sending her water. She can find it herself," Haymitch answered as he walked up to the bar, poured himself a drink and sat down.

Effie left her cup of coffee and turned to him. "Find it herself? She's going to die of dehydration first!"

"No she's not. There's a body of water not too far off. She'll find it," He said assuredly.

"How do you know where the water is?" Effie asked. "Did you design the arena?" Her lips were pursed.

"No, I didn't design the arena," Haymitch mimicked her voice. "They panned out earlier and did a wide shot."

"Oh..." Effie turned to retrieve her coffee and said, "Well, I'm going to finish this up and head back to the party. Anyone joining me?"

"I'll go," Haymitch said. "Nothing to watch around here."

Effie rolled her eyes and mumbled, "Perfect."

By the next afternoon the team was on edge. Haymitch had scored several top paying sponsors after Katniss' and Peeta's display in the arena. The Careers were now the laughing stock of the Capitol. The tributes from District 12 had pulled one over on them and they had no clue. However, Haymitch's refusal to send Katniss some much needed water had become a bone of contention between the close knit team.

"Perhaps just a small amount. Enough to get her to her destination?" Portia suggested.

"No." Haymitch answered. "I'm the mentor. I decide what gets sent and when it goes in."

"I don't see how it could hurt, Haymitch." Cinna commented.

"Trust me. It'll hurt. She needs the drive." Haymitch watched the television screen as the entire thing was now focused on his female tribute. "Come on, sweetheart. Come on." He murmured to the television set.

"Drive?" Effie asked under her breath. "How about saving her life? Isn't that enough drive?" Effie turned on Haymitch and said, "You have no right to hold out on her!"

"I'm not holding out!" Haymitch snapped.

"Then what are you doing? *Hmmmm*? You're supposed to be her mentor!" Cinna and Portia watched as the pair went at each other.

"I am mentoring her!" Haymitch stood up and crossed to Effie.

"This!" Effie pointed at the screen. "*This* is what you call mentoring?! That girl could have a drink of water within seconds and you...you..." She smacked the glass of alcohol he was reaching for out of his hand. "You have no right to drink! If she can't drink, neither can you!"

"I can do whatever the hell I damn well please! I'm not in the arena!"

"You should be! You make me sick! Just watching you waste away what the Capitol gave to you. And you have the nerve to call yourself a Victor!?"

"What they *gave* to me?!" Haymitch was screaming. "They didn't *give* me a damn thing, sweetheart! I *earned* it! And so will she!"

"Oh because you suffered she has to..."

"Haymitch!" Cinna screamed.

"Effie!" Portia called out.

"What?!" Effie and Haymitch answered in unison.

"She found it." Cinna answered with a smile. "She found the river."

Effie and Haymitch looked at the television to see Katniss standing in a body of water.

"Yes!" Haymitch called out.

"Thank God," Effie sat in a chair as though she were deflating.

Haymitch poured a drink as Katniss filled up her water bottle and dropped some iodine in it. "Told you she'd find it!" He stood in front of Effie shaking his beverage in her face, as if to taunt her.

Effie grabbed it from his hand and said, "She's not drinking *yet*," and glared up at him.

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Gale had spent part of the day at school, but only so he could get some answers. When he saw the person he'd been looking for he walked straight up to her.

"Hi, Madge."

He could tell she was surprised to see him by the look on her face. "Hi, Gale." She turned to walk away. "I'm late for class."

"Thought you had lunch right now?" Gale knew she was avoiding him. He didn't care whose daughter she was. He was determined to get some answers.

Madge stopped walking and turned to him. "What? What do you want?"

"I want to know what's going on between Peeta and Katniss."

"Then I suggest you ask one of them." She started to walk away, but Gale stepped in front of her.

"That's not really an option for me right now, Madge."

"Look, Gale. I don't know what's going on with them." She answered him.

"But you've got your suspicions don't you?" He asked.

"After their interviews and how they've been acting in the arena, I think everybody is a little suspicious. Isn't that why *you're* here?" Gale knew she had a point.

"So you can't tell me anything?"

"No." Madge looked him in the eyes and said, "Gale, I can't tell you a thing." She waited then said, "Do you mind if I leave now?"

Gale stepped out of her way and followed her with his eyes as she headed down the hall. She stopped once to talk to some other girl, but the girl was standing around a corner and all Gale could make out was one shoe. Madge glanced back at him and walked out of view. Tomorrow, he thought, I'm finding Delly Cartwright. I'm sure she can answer my questions. Gale headed out of school and made his way home.

"Mom?" He called out as he entered the house.

"In here." She was sitting on the sofa watching the television set. Katniss was lying face down in the mud. "Get up, sweetie. It's right there."

"Come on, Catnip." Gale willed her to notice her surroundings. "You're right on top of it." His face lit up as she realized where she was.

"That's it. Come on."

"Thank God," Hazelle breathed a sigh of relief. "I was so worried."

"Not me," Gale had a look of determination on his face as he watched Katniss. "I knew she'd find it."

"Well, I'm glad *you* knew." Hazelle stood up and went into the kitchen and got to work.

"She's got water now, mom." Gale stepped up behind Hazelle and put his hands on her shoulders. "All she needs is to make a bow. With that knife, she might be able to. Then there'll be no stopping her." Gale took one last look at the television set and said, "I'm going hunting. Be back later."

As he walked to the woods Gale wondered if Peeta could somehow find a way to sneak out of the Career's camp with the bow and arrow. Maybe take a few more out for good measure? But then who would kill Peeta? Gale's eyes flew open as he asked himself that question. He hoped, for Katniss' sake that she wouldn't have to.

Gale checked his snares, found a few rabbits and gathered some things for his family. He made a mental note to head out before sunrise to hunt for Katniss' family.

He walked into his house and placed the rabbits in the kitchen before going into the living room to join his family around the television set.

"Anything new?" Gale asked.

"The Careers are pretty close to her, but they haven't seen her yet," his brother Vick answered.

"How far away are they?" Gale looked at the television set, but the screen was split into two different scenes. It didn't give him an idea of how far apart Katniss was from the Careers.

"They're on the other side of the river. Upstream," Hazelle answered.

They watched as the group of Careers began to argue and breathed a sigh of relief when Peeta convinced them to go back to the Cornucopia. When Peeta went back to the river to refill the water jugs,

Gale was grateful. Had all of them gone, they would've seen Katniss for sure.

Gale knew the moment Peeta spotted Katniss from the look on Peeta's face. He listened as Peeta whispered to Katniss from his spot across the river. She had no clue he was there, but Peeta still spoke to her as though she were right next to him. Gale couldn't help but feel guilty at the fact that Peeta would be dead soon. When Katniss talked to herself and mentioned Peeta by name, Gale's heart broke in two. At one point Gale heard his mother catch her breath. He no longer needed to ask Delly any questions. The look on Katniss' face told him everything he needed to know.

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"This is ridiculous!" Clove complained. "How long are we going to search for her here?"

"As long as I say!" Cato turned and yelled at her.

"Maybe Lover Boy was right? Maybe we should head in the other direction?" Marvel suggested. "We haven't seen a sign of...anyone since we changed course."

"Look, she needs water and this is the only other source, so she's got to come here." Cato told them.

"Unless she's been here and gone," Peeta suggested. Hoped was more like it. Something in his gut told him that they were close to Katniss and he was worried.

"Has she been, Lover Boy?" Cato turned on him and began accusing him. "Because the only person that saw a sign of her was you." He pushed a finger into Peeta's chest.

"Yeah and I told you how to find her, but you guys wanted to go back to camp instead of traveling on, so don't blame me for losing her!" Peeta raised his voice and gripped his knife.

"We did look for her!" Cato yelled.

"For an hour," Peeta knew that things were getting unstable with the Careers. "We could've been out longer if somebody hadn't forgotten to fill up the water bottles." He turned his eyes towards Glimmer.

"Don't blame me!" She defended herself.

"Why not?" Clove joined in. "He's right! If you had just done your part, we would've found her that first night now we're a day away from camp!"

Peeta started to walk back towards their campsite. "This is stupid! I'm going back! You guys want to waste your time, go ahead, but I'm sick of this! We're wasting time and energy fighting each other when we should be looking for Katniss!" He started walking again. He knew he'd either hear the sound of feet joining him or get a knife in the back.

"Wait up!" Cato called out. Peeta raised an eyebrow and grinned then quickly turned his face into stone as he heard Cato say, "Come on. Let's go back to camp."

The group walked for several minutes before Peeta remembered that no one had refilled their water bottles. He was sure this would cause another argument amongst the group, but since he didn't feel like dying of thirst he asked. "Did anybody refill the canteens?" They all

stood there and stared at each other. "Christ!" He started to grab them. "Give them to me. I'll fill them up." The group laughed as he shook his head and headed back down to the river.

Peeta bent down and filled one jug, then another when out of the corner of his eye he saw her. She was far off, but he knew it was her. Katniss. She was drinking water. Walking at the edge of the riverbank. He quickly checked to make sure none of the Careers followed him back to the river then looked back at Katniss.

There was a mist splashing up around her from the river beating against the rocks as she walked. It matches your eyes, he thought. He stared at her for a moment. His heart swelled as he took the image of her in. He had never seen anything so beautiful. "My God, I love you," he whispered.

She moved and sat against a rock and started looking off into space. He watched as she picked a flower and sat back down to stare at it. He took one last look and whispered, "What are you thinking about over there?" He lifted the canteens, whispered, "Stay safe, Katniss." Then jogged to his waiting group.

"What took you so long?" Glimmer asked.

"You know Glimmer, maybe you should do some of the work and then you'll know exactly how long it takes to get it done." Peeta chuckled as the rest of the Careers laughed.

"Funny, Lover Boy," Glimmer hiked the bow and arrows over her shoulder.

Peeta wanted to smack himself for not suggesting that Glimmer join him. She always had the bow and arrows. If he could somehow get

her alone, he could kill her and get Katniss her weapon. Peeta now had a new agenda. He was going to be Glimmer's new best friend.

"Aww, come on. You know I'm just teasing you." He gave her a grin as they slowly walked through the woods. "I didn't mean that." Peeta put his hand on her shoulder and said, "Tell you what, the next time it's your turn to fill the water, I'll help. Okay?" He dropped his hand and gave her a smile.

"You're awfully nice considering I might kill you in your sleep," Glimmer gave him a mischievous grin.

"I'll take my chances." Peeta looked straight ahead and walked with the rest of the group.

It was hard not to hate the Careers. They were small-minded, self absorbed kids, but that was how they were brought up. Peeta knew this wasn't an excuse. If it were, than he'd be an abusive ass. He kept to the back of their pack as he let his mind wander.

Cato had a temper. A vicious one. So did Marvel for that matter, but Marvel wasn't that hard to take out, he might have been temperamental, but he was an idiot. Cato on the other hand was a worry. He excelled in everything he did. Except shooting. Peeta thought of Cato's attempts on hitting a rabbit, with the bow and arrows, while they were in the woods and it took everything he had not to laugh at him.

Peeta's father used to say that Katniss hit every squirrel in the eye with her shots and squirrels moved pretty fast, plus they were a lot smaller than a rabbit. Peeta couldn't wait to see Katniss in action. He was sure it would be something amazing to watch. And she'd put you to shame, Cato, he thought to himself.

Clove was sinister. There was no other word Peeta could think of for her. She actually enjoyed killing people. All of them did. Even Glimmer.

Peeta actually thought that Glimmer could've easily been a resident of the Capitol, she was *that* superficial. Unfortunately for Glimmer, she had been born in District 1 and only had a short lived residency at the Capitol while they were in training for the Games.

"Seriously? We're stopping?" Peeta asked. It was getting late and the group was tired.

"You in a hurry to get back?" Clove asked him.

Peeta didn't think they were far enough away from Katniss. They had only traveled for about three hours before they all started whining about how hungry they were. He wanted to scream out, there's a reason it's called the Hunger Games! But he didn't.

"Yeah, I'd like some decent food and not these...dried strips of... What the hell is this?" Peeta held up something in his hand and they all started laughing.

"Looks like leather." Marvel said.

Peeta took a bite. "Tastes like leather too."

"That's why I brought fruit." Marvel opened up his pack and took out some packages of dried fruit. "Tastes good, Lover Boy." Marvel dangled it in front of Peeta's face and said, "Want some?"

"No. I'll stick with my leather." Peeta had a hard enough time sitting around and eating with them, sharing food with them made him sick. He'd rather be with Katniss at the riverbank. She was probably in a

tree by now, he thought. Hiding up there away from the Careers. The thought of her sitting up in a tree watching them eat dried food while she ate fresh rabbit brought a smile to his face.

"What are you smiling at Lover Boy?" Clove glared at him.

The question caught Peeta off guard. "Just got an image, in my head, of something."

"What?" Clove asked.

"Maybe he's thinking of his girlfriend?" Marvel teased.

Peeta rolled his eyes and leaned towards Glimmer. "I was actually picturing a loaf of bread with an arrow through it." He had made reference to something he had said to her about bakers not requiring the skill of a bow and arrow.

Glimmer chuckled at him as the rest of the group shrugged it off. "Funny," Glimmer held out a package of dried fruit to him and Peeta accepted one.

"Thanks," Peeta said as he offered her some of his dried beef. "Leather?" Glimmer giggled as she took a strip out of the bag.

Peeta hoped that Glimmer would doze off during their watch, but there was no such luck. He had even suggested they take the watch after theirs. "Marvel and Clove are cranky if they don't get at least three hours of consecutive sleep."

"No kidding," Glimmer squinted. "What's that?"

"What's what?" Peeta asked.

"That?" Glimmer pointed off into the distance.

Peeta tried to focus on what he was seeing. When it registered he quietly said, "Fire." His eyes flew open as he yelled, "Fire!"

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Katniss felt rejuvenated now that she had replenished the fluids her body so desperately craved. She walked across the edge of the river, drank some more and let the cool water bring relief to her hot skin. Now all I need is a bow and arrows, she thought to herself. Maybe I could make one? She considered this as she sat against the boulder at the river's bank.

She began scanning the woods with her eyes and came upon a flower. Its petals were bright blue. She walked over to it and picked it then sat back down. "It matches your eyes, Peeta." She said without knowing. Where are you? She wondered. Are you still with the Careers? Are you safe? Have they hurt you? Are they torturing you to find out how I got an eleven? This last thought made Katniss sick. She knew he'd never tell them, but that brought her no sense of relief. If anything, it gave her a reason to worry. She tried to push thoughts of him out of her head, but he seemed to be on her mind so much since she'd been by the river. "Time to move," she said to herself.

Her eyes scanned the trees, looking for shelter. Her water bottle had become her new friend and it was gripped tightly in her hand.

Haymitch, it turned out, was actually quite useful. She was sure she was going to die of thirst. Sure that he had gotten them some sponsors and was just holding out on her, but then she fell face first into the mud and she realized that her mentor wasn't as stupid as she thought. He probably knew she could find the water on her own and

didn't want to waste any sponsor's gifts. Well, he did win this thing once, she reminded herself.

She climbed into the tree and secured herself in, a nightly ritual for her since the start of the Games. She would wait for the anthem to play and look at the sky, waiting for the images to appear and each night, when the sky was void of Peeta's face, she'd peek out from her sleeping bag, look at the moon and whisper, "Goodnight, Peeta." Afterwards she'd send him a silent message behind the shelter of her bag. One meant for him and him alone.

Tonight as she let her thoughts roam she talked to him in her head. 'I felt you today. I felt like you were right here with me for some reason and I know that's crazy, because you're a whole day away by the Cornucopia, but still... And I saw a flower that matched your eyes. Have I ever told you how much I loved your eyes? Well, I do. They're warm...friendly...so full of love whenever you look at me. I ate your favorite today. Rabbit. It didn't taste as good without you to share it with. Will we ever eat together again? I hope so. Are you safe, Peeta? Please be alive. I don't care about the Careers. We can figure out something to get rid of them, just get away from them while you still can. Be careful. Goodnight, Peeta. I miss you.'

Katniss fell asleep listening to the sound of the night's creatures. There were howls in the distance. Squirrels scurrying about in the trees. The rustling of leaves as the wind blew. When the stampede of animals began to rain down upon her, several hours later, she knew something was wrong. Her eyes flew open as she saw the flames begin to pour down on her from the forest above.

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The team from District 12 sat amongst the residents of the Capitol during the afternoon. Katniss coming upon the water had been a huge bet amongst the bookies and those that won were celebrating. Those that lost were looking for their next wager. The current wager was how long until the Careers and Peeta found Katniss.

Though the television screens held images of all the tributes in small boxes, the main images were of Katniss and the Careers. They were precariously close to one another and neither one of them knew it.

"I don't like this," Cinna took a sip of his wine. "They keep moving towards her."

"There's nothing we can do about it, Cinna." Haymitch snapped at him. "It's how the Games work." He turned to the group and said, "You didn't think we could keep her under a glass jar in there, did you?"

Portia stood up and said, "I'm going back to the suite. If they find her..." Portia looked around the room and finished. "...I don't want to be out here."

"I don't understand these children from District 1 and 2," Effie turned to the group. "Has no one taught them how to behave? All they do is fight with one another." She shook her head as though an argument in the arena was deplorable.

The room was getting quiet as the tributes on the screen started to holler.

"That's it, kid." Haymitch said as he watched Peeta distract the Careers away from the river and head back to the Cornucopia.

Portia sat back down and took Cinna's hand. "They're following him." Cinna patted her hand. "They're actually following him back to their camp."

There were mixed reactions throughout the party. Some were cheering Peeta on. Some were cursing Cato and the rest of the Careers, but the team from District 12 was flying high until Peeta mentioned something about going back for water. Effie gasped. Portia and Cinna squeezed each other's hands and Haymitch held his glass so tight he was surprised it didn't break.

"Peeta's going!" Someone called out from the crowd. "He's going back to the river!" New bets started flying around. People betting on whether or not he'd see Katniss and if he did, whether or not he'd call the rest of the group back.

"This is nerve racking," Effie lifted up her empty glass and put it back down on the table. "I need a drink." Haymitch slid his over.

They watched as Peeta filled canteen after canteen and then he saw her.

Effie lifted her hand to her chest as she took in the image of Peeta and Katniss that the Capitol had enlarged on the television screens. Peeta looked like he had seen a ghost, at his first sight of her, then he checked for the Careers. When he was certain they weren't coming he looked at Katniss again and his face morphed into one of love.

Sighs echoed throughout the room. Portia's breath caught in her chest as she watched Peeta and Katniss. She felt Cinna squeeze her fingers and they gave each other approving looks.

Haymitch couldn't watch. All he could see was a good and decent kid that was willing to do more than anyone he'd ever known, to save the

life of another. The thought of Peeta dying in the arena made Haymitch wish he hadn't given Effie his drink.

Haymitch's eyes flew to the screen when he heard, "My God, I love you." Peeta had spoken without even realizing it. Everyone in the room was going crazy for his tributes and their romance. There were people in the room who were actually shedding a tear over them.

Katniss picked a flower and spoke softly. "It matches your eyes, Peeta." Haymitch hated himself for getting them into this. He should've just let them die, but now he had to watch them suffer.

"What are you thinking about over there?" Peeta smiled at Katniss as he placed the cap on the last of his water bottles. "Stay safe, Katniss." Peeta whispered to her from across the river.

Effie's eyes were filled with tears as she turned away from the group. She patted at them with a napkin and said, "Well that should give him some incentive." She tried to keep a smile on her face, but something inside of her ached for Katniss and Peeta and the torment they were enduring.

Haymitch excused himself and was accosted by multiple guests, all of which were interested in becoming sponsors, so he took a few minutes with each of them, but all he wanted to do was to get drunk. He looked around as he left the party. Everyone was celebrating the fact that Peeta got to see his beloved, Katniss. None of them cared that if she came back as a Victor she would be alone and she'd never see Peeta alive again.

Several hours later, Haymitch was woken up by the sound of Portia screaming, "FIRE!"

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were Chapter 13: Great Balls of Fire, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Thirteen: Great Balls of Fire!

In this chapter, you'll see what happened behind the scenes while Katniss was running for her life as well as Peeta and the Careers POV. Again I want to thank all of you for such amazing feedback. The fact that you're taking the time to comment after reading, some of you after each chapter, is humbling. Thank you. Thanks, A for your help and your opinions. You're a great sounding board! Now...let's read!

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

Effie's fingers were trembling as she lifted them to her lips. The scene on the television screen in front of her turned her insides to jelly.

In all the years that Effie Trinket had been an escort for the Capitol, she had never found herself emotionally attached to the Games. They were set as a reminder to the districts for the crimes they had committed. The Games had been part of their heritage. Effie had grown up watching them, but the actual Games themselves had never been what caught her attention. She believed in her country and their laws. To her, losing a few children a year was paltry compared to how many people died during the rebellion. She believed in her President and she was proud to help her country any way she could. Over time, she understood why the poorer districts lost the Hunger Games so often. They were careless people. Most of them had no manners whatsoever and they never believed in themselves. When they entered the Games, it was with the belief that they would die. When Effie had been given District 12 as her assignment, she shuddered. They were the worst of all the districts, but Effie saw it as a challenge. Perhaps she could provide an understanding to her tributes. Make them aware that they were sacrificing themselves for the greater good of a country, and if they worked hard, they could win and live in the lap of luxury. After a few years of watching her tributes die within days, sometimes minutes of the start of the Games, Effie no longer tried to instill patriotism into them. It was a waste of her time and energy. But this year...this year, Effie was questioning everything she had learned...she had believed in, her entire life.

She watched as Katniss dodged fireballs and ran for her life. At first Effie thought the fire was caused by a careless tribute and then she saw the balls of fury flying through the air in Katniss' direction. There was no reason for the fire except to liven up the Games. The Games,

Effie realized, was exactly what Haymitch had said. It was a television show. They may have started as a way to maintain peace, but over time they had become a source of entertainment and Effie didn't find anything she was watching remotely entertaining.

As Effie watched Katniss, her mind flashed to her sister, Prim. From what Effie could make out on Reaping Day, Prim had been a tiny little thing. Was that small child at home watching her sister fight for her life right now? Effie had only just got to know Katniss and Peeta, yet they had made a lasting impression on her, she couldn't imagine what Katniss' sister was going through at home, but if it was anything like Effie was feeling at that very moment, she pitied Prim and what she was experiencing.

Effie stood up, pulled the hem of her jacket down and said, "If you'll excuse me. I'm going to bed." She interrupted the rest of her team's expletives as they watched the Games.

Cinna, Portia and Haymitch turned to her.

"You're what?" Haymitch asked.

"I'm going to bed." Effie glanced at the television set one last time. "I'd rather not watch Katniss suffer if that's all right with you, Haymitch." One more fireball was thrown through the air and Effie shuddered.

It took everything in her power to keep her strict demeanor.

Haymitch nodded his head and said, "We'll send for you if something happens."

She walked to her quarters, prepared herself for bed and laid her head upon the pillow. As she stared at the ceiling, she wondered if Katniss was still alive. She must've been or else someone would've told her.

Still... She pressed the button on the remote and watched as the Careers started to hunt her down. The Gamemakers did this, Effie knew it. They wanted Katniss dead. When the screen showed a close up of Katniss trying to muffle her screams due to a bad burn on her leg, Effie shut the television off.

The moment Katniss and Peeta entered the City Center for the Tribute Parade, Effie's heart raced with the anticipation that she might finally get a new district to sponsor. Perhaps one of her tributes could actually win this year and if a tribute from District 12 won the Hunger Games, Effie was sure to be promoted. Now all she cared about was getting her pair back safely. But you won't get *them* back, Effie, she thought. You'll get one of them...if you're lucky.

Effie Trinket spent hours questioning all of her beliefs and not liking the answers she came up with.

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"Run! Run!" Peeta heard someone screaming from behind him as he ran through the fiery blaze. The smoke was thick and burning his eyes, he couldn't breathe. Cato flew by him, running for his life and Peeta followed. The fire was tapering off, but the smoke was still pummeling through the air. Peeta knew if they didn't hurry, they'd all be dead from smoke inhalation. He ran for his life. To his side he saw Glimmer fall face first into the dirt. In his heart he was thinking, good. One more down, but his head told him, she's got the bow and arrows. The thought of stripping them from her and racing to another part of the woods flashed through his head, but he knew he'd never survive. He stopped, turned around and ran to her. He picked Glimmer up from the back of her shirt, grabbed her arm and began pulling her towards safety.

Peeta stood, bent over, with his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. They were in the clear. All of the Careers had made it out. Damaged, but unfortunately, alive. All of them were choking, covered in soot and ash. Glimmer had a small burn on her arm. Marvel had trampled into some bushes and gotten some cuts. Clove's neck had been singed by the fire and Cato had crashed into the ground when he made it out of the deadly blaze, resulting in a large knot on his head. Peeta didn't notice his own injuries. There were a few cuts here and there, but most of his pain was shooting out of his lungs.

Peeta saw the flash of light fly overhead and head for the forest. "What is that?" His eyes scanned the fire. It was huge, but controlled. He immediately knew that this was no ordinary fire. This was engineered by the Gamemakers. They were sending fireballs into the woods and they were aiming it in a specific area. Katniss! Peeta shot straight up.

"They're after somebody," Cato had come to the same conclusion as Peeta. "We've got to go back."

"I'm not going into that fire!" Peeta shouted. Cato was reacting exactly as the Gamemakers had intended, but Peeta had to try and keep them away from Katniss. "We'll all die!"

"We're going!" Cato screamed as he put the tip of his sword under Peeta's chin. "Anybody have a problem with that?" Cato looked at the rest of the group. They were all hunched over, trying to catch their breath.

"Let's go." Clove nodded her head in agreement with Cato. "We can go around that way," she pointed towards the body of water. "...and head back by the edge of the river. If the fire gets bad, we can jump into the water."

The whole group was nodding. Peeta had no choice. "Okay." This was it. He could feel it in the pit of his stomach. The Careers would be finding Katniss sooner rather than later, and Peeta still didn't have her bow and arrows.

"Come on!" Cato waived his arm and headed back.

Peeta walked up to Glimmer, who was choking, and said, "You okay?" Her weapons were at her feet.

"Yeah." She looked at him and said, "Thanks." Peeta knew she had been thanking him for saving her life. Glimmer's eyes followed Cato and said, "We better go." She started walking off. Peeta stood back for a few seconds thinking, she's leaving them here. She's leaving the bow and arrows. Maybe, he thought, this was his chance. He'd grab them and make a run for it, but while he was going over the plan in his head, Glimmer turned to him and said, "Bring those for me, will ya?" She watched him as he carried the weapons to her and they joined the rest of their group.

When they made it to the river's edge Clove pointed out something in the distance across the water. Peeta's heart began to race. "There's something over there."

"You're seeing things," Peeta looked at where Clove had been pointing. Then he saw a flash of orange.

"No I'm not. Something's over there. Can't you see it?" Clove and the rest of the group tried to make it out. "It's orange."

"It's probably just a flame," Marvel said. But then they saw it moving.

"Flames don't move like that," Cato's eyes were glistening. "Move out!" He called to them.

Move, Katniss! Move! Peeta's head was screaming. Peeta looked up to the sky and noticed that the Gamemakers hadn't sent in anymore fireballs, which meant that the Careers were coming up on her. They had tried to make their way through the dense smoke, but breathing was impossible. Peeta was grateful that his group could no longer follow Katniss' exact path.

"We need to find another way around!" Marvel yelled to them.

"Let's go back," Peeta suggested. "It's the only way." All of the Careers were staring at him. "If we go in there, we won't last ten minutes!"

"He's right!" Glimmer joined in. "We need to find another way." The group looked at each other for a few seconds then nodded their agreement.

They had traveled around the river for the majority of the day, trying to decipher the pattern the blaze had made. If Peeta noticed something, he kept it to himself, but the Gamemaker's plan had been as obvious as the fire they started and there was no information Peeta could hide.

"She's got to be around here somewhere!" Cato stood at the end of a small pond.

"How do you know it's her?" Glimmer asked. "It could be anybody."

"It's her," Cato sneered. "Trust me. It's her."

"It could've killed her. Maybe she's dead already," Marvel suggested.

"Did you hear a cannon?!" Cato turned on him. "I'm telling you, she's around here!" Peeta watched as Cato's eyes scanned the woods.

"This way. Come on." Peeta didn't know if Cato had seen something

or not, but he knew, by the sound of Cato's cheers, the second they had found her. They had found Katniss.

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Gale woke up to the touch of his little sister's hand on his arm. "What's wrong?" He whispered so he wouldn't wake up his brothers.

"I couldn't sleep." Posy had tears in her eyes. "You need to come downstairs."

Gale held his sister's trembling fingers as he walked into the living room and saw the cause of his sister's tears. Balls of fire were being thrown into the arena at Katniss.

"They're going to kill her now, aren't they?" Posy asked in her tiny voice.

Gale pulled her into his lap and said, "Hey, this is Katniss we're talking about. You think a little wildfire is going to stop her?" He tried to relieve his sister's fears, but it was difficult considering Katniss was surrounded by flames.

Gale remembered her fiery entrance to the Tribute Parade and couldn't help but think that the Gamemakers were trying to send a message out to his district. Since Prim's name had been called, Katniss and Peeta had been taking the Games by storm. Two lowlifes from District 12 were making the Capitol look like fools and Gale knew that this was the punishment bestowed upon them.

"Should I get mom?" Posy asked.

"Yeah," Gale nodded his head. Posy had just stepped out of view when Katniss got hit in the leg with a fireball. Gale gripped his thigh and cringed for her. "Come on, Catnip. Get up." She was trying to take shelter, but the Gamemakers wouldn't let her rest very long.

When Hazelle came down, she sat with Gale and held Posy on her lap. "She'll be fine." She stroked her daughter's hair. "Katniss is smarter than anyone I know. She'll make it out of there."

Gale's worried eyes met his mother's. They both knew they could be witnessing her death at any moment. As the day progressed Gale realized what the Gamemakers had intended. The Careers were on Katniss' tail and in her current condition, she wouldn't stand a chance. Her only shot was Peeta.

They watched as Katniss scurried up a tree in an attempt to get away from the Careers. Posy smiled and said, "I think she'll get away. Peeta will help her, won't he?"

"Let's hope so," Hazelle answered.

Gale held his sister's hand and said, "He will. He'll help her."

They chuckled when Katniss taunted the Careers and winced when the Careers took shots at her with the bow and arrows.

Gale's eyes kept flashing back and forth between Katniss and Peeta. They weren't looking at each other. Peeta was deliberately looking away, but every now and then Gale could see him glare at a Career. Be careful, Peeta. He thought to himself.

"Let's just wait her out. She's got to come down at some point. It's either that or she starves to death," said Peeta. "We'll just kill her then."

That's it, Peeta. Get her some time. Maybe they'll fall asleep or something, Gale thought. But you've got to get her that bow.

Peeta glanced up at Katniss and the second he did, Gale could see the recognition in both their eyes. It was only a moment, but anyone watching could see it. He was grateful the Careers were preoccupied. If they had seen the look on both of their faces, Peeta would be dead where he stood.

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"This is my fault," Cinna said with sorrow in his voice.

"How is this your fault?" Portia asked.

"Girl on fire." Cinna looked at the television and his pulse began to drum behind his temples. "The moment I sent them out on that chariot..."

"We both sent them out, Cinna."

"Portia, are you telling me this is just a coincidence?" Cinna pointed to the screen as Katniss jumped out of the way of a falling tree. "Dear God!" His voice was soft and sullen. "I'm killing her."

"She's not dead. Neither of them are. They're strong. They're fighters and they are not dead yet. So quit acting like they are." Portia's words were filled with heartache. "At least Katniss has a shot at coming back. Peeta's just...just..." Portia had been fighting her emotions since she had closed Katniss' door the morning the Games began. She could see Katniss holding out her hand, her fingers extended as

Peeta's slipped out of hers. The sound of Katniss' voice calling out Peeta's name haunted her daily. Portia had finally let the tears fall.

Cinna slipped his arms around her and pulled her in for a hug. "You're right. They're not dead. They're strong. They can make it through this."

"What's the purpose?" Portia asked into his shoulder. "So he can die another day and she can live the rest of her life with his death looming over her? It's not fair, Cinna. It's not fair."

"I know. Shh," Cinna tried to keep Portia from saying too much in the Capitol's suite. "Shh..."

"He's such a great kid."

"I know he is." Cinna agreed.

"And she's so..." Portia pulled back from Cinna and said, "Did we do the right thing by trying to save her life?"

The expression on Cinna's face was one of curiosity. "Why would you ask that?"

"Cinna, she loves him just as much as he does her. Is that the life you want for her? Does she deserve to spend the rest of her life feeling like she was the reason he died?"

"Portia, Katniss doesn't wear her heart on her sleeve like Peeta does."

"So that's better? She should suffer silently through this the way Haymitch does?"

"She's too smart to fall into that kind of life. She's got her family and they need her."

"What about Katniss' needs? Has anyone stopped to consider what this might do to her? We both know what can happen after you become a Victor. Has anyone stopped and said she doesn't deserve that kind of life?"

"Would you rather they both die, Portia?"

Portia knew how Cinna had felt about Katniss. She felt just as strongly about Peeta, but Peeta would want Portia to do everything in her power to save Katniss. "No." Portia shook her head. "No. She needs to come home. She needs to win, doesn't she?"

Cinna nodded his head. "Yes." He walked Portia to the table and handed her a napkin. "We'll just have to remember, no matter how hard it is on us, it's going to be much harder on them. On Katniss when she gets back. We'll need to put our feelings aside and be there for her. Be strong for her."

Portia nodded her head and said, "I'd like to see what you've got in mind for Katniss to wear when she wins this thing." The tears were gone and in their place was pride. "I'd like to make something for Peeta. Maybe his family can..." she swallowed. "Can bury him in it."

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There was a voice screaming out in Peeta's head. 'Run, Katniss! Run!' She was injured. They all were. The fire had taken its toll on all of them, but Katniss had something very wrong with her. Peeta held his breath as he watched her scamper up a tree. Glimmer was just ahead of him with the bow and arrows, but Clove was right by her side and Peeta knew that Clove rarely missed when she threw her knives, so trying to take out Glimmer wasn't an option. He could see the hatred

on the Careers' faces. If they caught Katniss, her death would be brutal.

"How's everything with you?" Katniss called down from the tree. Peeta had to bite his lip to keep from smiling. She was taunting them.

"Well enough. Yourself?" Cato asked with a sneer.

"It's been a bit warm for my taste." Peeta turned his head to keep from laughing. She was fearless. "The air's better up here. Why don't you come up?"

"Here, take this, Cato." Glimmer handed off the bow and arrows to Cato and Peeta felt the blood to his heart stop.

"No, I'll do better with my sword." His sword! Peeta was petrified. Cato was mediocre at best with the bow and arrows, but when it came to using a sword, he never missed. Peeta gripped the handle of his knife and began polishing the blade. It was an excuse to have it in his hands in case Cato tried to kill Katniss; Peeta was prepared to jam the knife through Cato's heart.

Cato jumped onto the bark of the tree and began to climb it.

The group was cheering him on. "Kill her, Cato!"

"Go! Go!"

"Kill her!"

In that moment Peeta thought of the bear trying to chase Katniss for a beehive full of honey. She said the bear was too heavy and he kept falling. That's when Peeta heard the branch snap and saw Cato lying on his back in the dirt.

Glimmer tried to follow in his footsteps and climb the tree, but she knew she couldn't make it up as high as Katniss and gave up.

Peeta heard Glimmer's frustrated cry and saw her take aim on Katniss with the bow and arrows, but Peeta had seen her during training and the girl couldn't hit the side of a house if it were right in front of her. When the arrow lodged in the tree and Katniss waived it around at them, he willed her not to egg them on, but she did. She waived the arrow in the air as though she were thankful for the weapon.

"Maybe you should throw the sword?" Katniss called down and Peeta could hear the laughter in her voice. This last comment caused Cato's face to turn red with anger.

"We've got to get her down from there." Cato whispered hoarsely. "Any ideas?" The group of Careers were huddled together trying to figure out a way to lure Katniss out of the tree.

Peeta's mind went into overdrive. 'Okay, Katniss. You were chased by a bear and you got away. Now you've got four bears coming after you, can you escape the same way you did back home?'

"Let's just wait her out." The Careers turned on Peeta and glared. "She's got to come down at some point. It's either that or starve to death." The Careers looked at each other as if trying to decide on what to do. "We'll just kill her then." Even saying the words caused Peeta's stomach to turn. He watched the Careers and waited as they finally agreed to follow his lead. Peeta's eyes flashed up to Katniss. He tried to send her a silent message. 'I bought us some time, Katniss. We'll get out of this. We'll figure something out.'

She looked down at him and held his gaze for a brief moment then turned away. If she made eye contact with Peeta for too long, he knew the Careers would be able to see through his plan.

His eyes scanned the surrounding trees as they gathered wood for a fire. He tried to find one that was close enough to hers so she could crawl along a branch and sneak away, but before she did, Peeta was determined to get her the bow. He glanced at Glimmer as she took a drink of water and thought, I'm sorry. Either you die or she dies and she's *not* dying. Peeta would be taking another life tonight. Glimmer's death was now being formulated in his mind.

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Haymitch drank glass after glass of wine. When he didn't get the desired effect, he switched to something harder. The Careers were about to kill Katniss. They had her trapped in a tree. She was injured and Haymitch had no clue how she would get out of the situation.

He watched as a family laughed and enjoyed the party the Capitol was throwing for the Games. A little boy stabbed at his younger sister with a toy sword, as though he were a tribute, and his parents laughingly encouraged him. The sight of it made him queasy. He looked around at everyone. They were eating, drinking...going on with their lives as though they didn't have a care in the world and on the television screens Katniss sat in a tree, pulling pieces of charred fabric out of the wound in her thigh. She bit her lip as she yanked the material out of the burn and didn't make a sound. Haymitch watched as her face flinched.

He had money from the sponsors, but it wasn't enough for the medication that would help ease Katniss' pain and no sponsor would consider spending their money on a tribute that was as good as dead, so Haymitch was as a stand still.

He could see the agony in Peeta's eyes as he looked up at Katniss. Haymitch immediately chastised himself. Katniss volunteered for these Games without blinking an eye and that kid joined the Careers to save her and you're sitting here getting drunk.

Haymitch stood up and left the room. He went directly to Effie's quarters and knocked on her door, but she wasn't there. He found Cinna and asked, "Where's Effie?"

"I thought she went to bed," Cinna responded.

"She's not there." Haymitch slapped the edge of the chair he was standing in front of and said, "If she comes back, tell her to meet me in the party. I need her." He turned and left.

When he entered the party he headed straight for some of the top sponsors, trying to get a feel for them and if they'd be willing to help Katniss, but they were consoling Haymitch as though Katniss had already died.

"I really thought she had a chance."

"She was such a good tribute. It's a shame..."

"They'll kill him the second she's dead."

"Won't be long before they..."

He heard Effie's shrill of a laugh and followed her voice. "Oh, here he is." Effie held out her hand and said, "Haymitch, you remember Carter Darlington." Haymitch shook the man's hand. "Carter here was just telling me how resourceful Katniss and Peeta are." Effie gave Haymitch a knowing look and said, "If you two will excuse me."

"So Haymitch. Think your girl will get out of this?" Carter gestured to the television screen with his chin. "The Gamemakers really pulled a fast one on her."

"You said it yourself, Carter. She's resourceful, but..." Haymitch put his hand on the man's back and said, "...then again...so are you."

Carter laughed and said, "What do you want, Haymitch?"

"Nothing much. Just want to get our girl a little burn cream. Give her a chance to show her stuff."

Carter chuckled at him and said, "Always did like the underdog." He shook Haymitch's hand and said, "Let's get her some ointment. See what she's really made of."

"You won't be disappointed," Haymitch smiled as he left the party and noticed Effie in his wake. "Thought you were going to bed."

"She's in so much pain and I..." Effie let her sentence trail off. Her steps were making a clicking noise as she hurried down the hall.

"She won't be in pain much longer." Haymitch entered in a code given to him by Carter. The code gave Haymitch the ability to transfer money from the sponsors to the Capitol and provide a gift to a tribute. He watched Katniss on the screen as she climbed further up the tree and wondered what she was doing. The anthem was playing, and then Haymitch saw her sawing at a branch. His laughter echoed through the room. "That's it, sweetheart! Show them *all* what you're made of!" He pushed a button and watched as a silver parachute made its way into the arena and landed on Katniss' sleeping bag. "This should help," he looked at Effie whose face lit up with a smile.

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were Chapter 14: Run, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Fourteen: Run!

In this chapter Katniss finally gets her bow and arrows! Yay! Peeta spends the night under the tracker jacker tree and we're introduced to Rue. If you haven't noticed by now, I write one chapter for every chapter in the book. I start and finish them the same way the book does...or as close to it as possible since this is AU and all. Thanks again for A who caught a HUGE boo boo

for me. It's good to have two sets of eyes. And thanks again for such sweet and touching comments in regards to this fic.

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

Her body ached. Her stomach growled and her skin was blistered. Below Katniss were the Careers. They were building a campfire and talking to each other as if it was just another day at school. Peeta barely spoke, but when he did, most of his comments were directed at Glimmer. Katniss felt a surge of jealousy run through her when she saw him lean over and whisper something into Glimmer's ear, but then she saw what Glimmer had hanging off of her shoulder. It was Katniss' sheath of arrows. Katniss rolled her eyes and thought, and you thought *I* was simpleminded for falling for the sappy romance stuff? Only Peeta could get a girl to act like a flirtatious fool in the middle of the Games.

On occasion she'd see a Career looking up at her with hatred, but night was slowly starting to fall, and she was hidden in the branches of the tree. As opposed to her hunters, Katniss had darkness on her side, whereas the Careers were illuminated by the glow of their fire. This gave her a minor sense of ease. At least she could make sure Peeta was safe. Her mind began to wander. How would she get out of this? No, she realized, how would *they* get out of this? Peeta could no longer stay with this group. She would make sure that he came with her when she escaped, but how...how could she get away? And what was that noise?

Katniss turned her head slowly towards the soft hissing sound. There was an animal staring at her from a neighboring tree. Great! Now the animals are trying to kill me, she told herself. Then she saw a tiny hand poke out of the branches and point. Katniss sat up and looked at the strange animal, trying to make out what her eyes were seeing.

This was no animal. Katniss smiled at the memory of the little girl from District 11 who stole Cato's knife during training. She was in the tree next to hers, trying to get her attention and pointing at something overhead.

Katniss followed the girl's finger and saw what had been hanging above her about fifteen feet up in the tree. There's something there, but what? She tried to focus her eyes, but the familiar buzzing sound mixed in with the night air told her what she was staring at. There was a nest overhead. Peeta's words echoed through her ears.

"Just do me a favor. Don't go messing around with any bears or beehives in the arena, okay?"

She skimmed the tree, taking special care on the smaller branches, and studied the hive from afar. After careful scrutinizing, she came to the conclusion that this was no ordinary beehive. This was a nest of tracker jackers, a mutation the Capitol had created to help win the war. Their venom could be deadly if stung enough times and Katniss needed something deadly to get her out of this mess. If she tried to saw the hive down from its branch, she could be risking her own life, but her life was already at risk. However, she'd be putting Peeta's life in danger by dropping the nest on the pack of Careers. Time wasn't on her side. The sky was getting dark and her only chance to saw at the branch was during the nightly anthem that played for the entire arena to hear. She looked down at Peeta, trying to determine his proximity to the nest if and when it would crash down. He was in the center of the group. A dangerous place to be. The music started to play and Katniss began sawing. The entire time she kept saying to herself, don't sting Peeta. Don't sting Peeta. Not once had the thought of being stung herself, crossed her mind. The blisters from the fire were causing her hands to scream out in pain, but she bit her lip and kept up the pace. The song was coming to an end and she hadn't yet made her way

through the entire branch. Tomorrow, she thought, I'll wake up early and finish it before the Careers get up. Maybe I'll be able to warn Peeta...somehow. She slid back down to her spot on the tree branch and her eyes lit up. Sitting atop of her sleeping bag was a silver parachute, a gift from a sponsor. Katniss read the note Haymitch had attached to it and looked out into the night, mouthing the words 'Thank you.' The moment she applied the ointment she felt relief. Things were starting to come together. Now all she had to do was warn Peeta...and Rue. Yes, Katniss reminded herself. The little girl told her about the nest, the least Katniss could do was give her fair warning as to when she'd be dropping it.

She overheard Peeta saying he'd be right back. After some grief from a couple of Careers, Peeta yelled at them and walked into the woods behind Katniss' tree. Her head followed him on his path. Where was he going? Katniss looked down to make sure she was hidden from the Careers and climbed around the back of the tree. Peeta had been standing in some bushes far enough away so his new friends couldn't see him, but close enough so that Katniss could still make him out. His eyes were scanning the tree's leaves in search of her. There was no way she could make it down without the Careers getting to her. No way she could make it to the tree next to her without the branches breaking. They were too thin. But she could climb down the back of the tree a little further and try to let Peeta know about the tracker jackers. She shimmied to the end of a branch, as far as it could safely take her and pulled a tiny bit of bark from the tree. She hurled it into the bush he was standing next to and waited for him to find her. It didn't take long. They were at least fifty feet apart, but Katniss felt like he was right next to her. Peeta was trying to mouth something to her, but she couldn't make it out. She shook her head and shrugged her shoulders letting him know that she didn't understand him. The clock was ticking. She knew she didn't have much time. She made a sawing motion with her hand and pointed up to where the nest was. Peeta's

eyes tried to follow her direction, but one of the Careers called out to him. He headed back to the pack slowly, trying to see what it was that Katniss had been pointing at. She kept gesturing to him as he walked back. She was making a sawing motion with her hand. He was almost in view of the Careers; Katniss had to think of something. She put her hand out, as if to stop him and he paused. He bent over and pretended to adjust his shoe. Katniss lied flat against the tree's branch. Cato had come to see what was taking him so long. Peeta had actually removed his shoe and shook it out as though there were something inside of it. Cato waited for him as he put it back on. He glanced once more at Katniss when Cato's back was turned and then went back to the group around the fire. This time he sat on the opposite side of the hive. Katniss breathed a sigh of relief, but he was still too close for her comfort. She stayed on her branch for a few moments longer then went back to her sleeping bag, allowing herself to doze off, but never really falling asleep. She listened as Peeta talked to Glimmer and the rest of the group slept. Though she knew sleep would never really come for her that night, she waited for him to lift his eyes to her, as she knew he would, and once he did, she whispered to him, "Goodnight, Peeta." Tonight when she said the words her heart ached more than ever before. Peeta, she thought, please get out of here before dawn. She knew that if she had caused his death, she'd break all promises she had made about winning the Games and die. Allowing him to give his life for her survival was one thing, she couldn't control that, it was what he wanted, but killing him herself...she'd never be able to live with that.

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"She looked pretty beat up when she was climbing that tree," Marvel said with a wicked smile. "Guess the Gamemakers wanted to see

what the girl would really look like if she *were* on fire." He laughed and the rest of the group laughed with him.

Glimmer looked at Peeta and rolled her eyes at Marvel's joke.

"Think she's hurt?" Clove asked.

"I'd say so," Cato answered. "She got the brunt of that fire."

"Well, she was strong enough to make it up that tree." Clove commented.

Cinna sat with his sketchpad in his hand and tried to ignore the dialogue coming from the Careers. They were taking pleasure in Katniss' pain and for the first time in Cinna's life, he wished death upon a tribute. Whenever he heard Peeta's voice he'd lift his face to the screen to see if there was anything useful, but Peeta was just playing along with the group for the time being.

"We could take the first watch if you want," Peeta leaned over and whispered into Glimmer's ear. He gave her a soft smile and the girl looked like she was going to melt.

"The kid's brilliant!" Haymitch said as he walked into the room. "That girl is tripping over herself every time he suggests they do something together."

"And you think that's brilliant?" Cinna asked. In the back of his mind he couldn't help but think that Katniss probably wouldn't find it brilliant at all.

"Hell yes!" Haymitch took a sip of juice and cringed at its blandness. "She's got what Katniss needs."

Cinna did a double take and looked at the screen. That's when he noticed the sheath of arrows hanging off of the girl's arm. His laugh started low in his belly than filled the room. "Now how did I miss that?"

"Don't know, but the kid's a genius." Haymitch sat on the sofa in front of the screen and watched.

Peeta started looking around the woods.

"Who are you looking for?" Clove asked with a questionable stare.

"I'm just..." Peeta stood up and started walking away. "I've got to go."

"Where ya going, Lover Boy?" Cato stood up and began giving him a hard time. "Trying to help your girlfriend escape?"

"I need to use the bathroom, is that okay with you?"

"I don't trust him," Marvel stood next to Cato. "How do we know this isn't what they've been planning all along?"

"Are you kidding me?" Peeta yelled at them. "Yes! You've got me! My plan was to get the Gamemakers to set us on fire! And then get Katniss stuck up a tree!" Peeta rolled his eyes and said, "If I was going to help her, don't you think I would've done it by now?"

"Leave him alone," Glimmer made a disgusted face at Cato. "The guy's got to go."

"Well if you're going. I'm going." Cato told him.

"Wanna hold it for me while I take a whiz too?" Peeta was nose to nose with him. "I'm sick of fighting with you guys. That's all you ever do! Geez!" Peeta started to walk away. "I'm going to go to the

bathroom. If you want to come, then come!" He stormed off behind the tree Katniss was in.

"Do you think he's trying to find a way for her to escape?" Cinna sat down in an empty chair.

"You can bet on it." Haymitch's eyes were glued to the screen.

The Careers sat down as Peeta walked behind the tree and into the bushes behind it. "We should just kill him and get it over with," Marvel took his sword and pushed the tip into the ground. "We've got the girl and she's not going anywhere."

"I agree," Clove said with a blank look on her face. "One less tribute to deal with later."

"Okay. Let's do it. Maybe seeing her Lover Boy suffer will get her to come down from that tree," Cato suggested.

"I think we should let him stick around till Thresh is dead," Glimmer poked a stick into their fire. "I don't know about you, but once Katniss is dead, we've got to deal with Thresh and I say the more of us against Thresh, the better."

"We can take Thresh," Marvel exclaimed.

"Oh please, Marvel! I don't know why you're all high and mighty. Peeta could've killed you...*twice*...and his ankle was twisted. You really think you can take Thresh?!" Glimmer stared at her tribute partner.

They were all silent for a few seconds until Clove spoke up. "Maybe we *should* wait until Thresh is dead."

Cato looked at each one of his group. "Lover boy did get the upper hand on you, Marvel." There was a hesitant look on his face. "He's pretty strong for a baker."

"All I'm saying is that Thresh is our next biggest threat and I think Peeta could help us with that," Glimmer shrugged. "But it's up to you guys. If you want to kill him now...*before* she's dead, then that's fine."

"I'm for killing him now." Marvel put his two cents in.

"I say we wait," Clove added.

Cato questioned Clove with his eyes. "Till Thresh is dead?"

"Yeah," Clove nodded her head. "The second he's dead, one of us can kill Lover Boy."

"Okay," Cato said. "We're agreed."

"I didn't agree to it," Marvel protested.

"Sorry, Marvel." Glimmer leaned back on her hands and gave him a righteous look. "Majority wins."

Haymitch lightly pounded his fist against his thigh and blew out a breath. "That was close. Told you the kid was smart for flirting with her."

"If Katniss makes it out of that tree, Haymitch. Peeta's got to get away from the Careers." Cinna's voice was worried.

"I already told you. The kid is smart. He'll get away from them." Haymitch stood up and went to the bar. He contemplated adding something to his juice then opted not to. The ice in his glass was making a tinkling noise. Haymitch's hand was shaking. "I wouldn't be

surprised if he convinced Glimmer to join him too." Haymitch chuckled thinking, that wouldn't be a bad idea. Then he'd definitely have Katniss' weapon.

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Where are you, Katniss? Peeta's mind was in high gear. He scanned the tree she was hiding in, hoping he could see her, but it was too dark to make anything out. He jumped a little when something flew at him and landed in the bush. He followed the direction it came from with his eyes and saw her face peeking out between some leaves. His heart began to race. He mouthed to her, 'The branches. Use the branches.' He pointed to the tree next to her, but she couldn't understand him. He took a step out from his hiding spot, checking to make sure no one was around. She was making a sawing motion with her hand and pointing to something. 'What are you pointing at, Katniss?'

"Hey, Lover Boy! What's taking you so long?" Peeta could hear Cato calling to him.

It took everything he had to drag his eyes away from Katniss. He walked around the tree and kept glancing upwards in the direction she was pointing, but he couldn't see anything. Was she going to drop a branch on them? That had to be it, he thought. She was going to saw a branch and let it fall onto the Careers. He bent down and pretended to fix his shoe.

"What the hell?" Cato came from around the tree. "You've been gone long enough."

"I've got something in my shoe." Peeta took it off and stuck his hand inside of it, shook it out then put it back on. Cato started talking to him,

but Peeta didn't hear anything he was saying. He was too busy trying to see what Katniss was pointing at. When his shoe was back on he took another peek and that's when he made it out. There was something hanging from a branch. He didn't know what, but it was large and he was sure that that's what Katniss was referring to.

He and Cato rejoined the group only this time, Peeta sat as far away from the branch Katniss was pointing at as possible. If it fell, he didn't want it to land on him. He was sure that she was trying to warn him.

"I'm going to sleep," Marvel announced. "I'll take the third watch."

"Of course you will," Glimmer said under her breath.

"Lover Boy," Cato said. "You and Glimmer can take the first watch." Peeta was nervous. His insides were shaking with anticipation.

"That's fine." He gave Glimmer a hint of a smile and saw the bow lying precariously close to the branch Katniss had been pointing at. If it fell, the bow would be lodged under it. He made a motion with his head to Glimmer as if telling her to sit by him.

She picked up her bow and arrows and perched herself too close to him for his liking. "Guess it's you and me again."

"Yup," He tried to hide his displeasure with a smile.

They sat quietly until the group fell asleep, then Peeta told her, "Glimmer, if you want to sneak in an hour of sleep...I won't tell."

"No, that's okay." Her voice was soft. "I don't mind sitting up with you."

Peeta hated the way she flirted with him. Hated the way she flirted with all of them. When Cato wasn't looking she used her sex appeal on Marvel. When Marvel wasn't around, she tried to work her wiles on

Cato. Sadly both of them fell for it. He tried to start a conversation that wouldn't lead to her making any suggestive comments to him. "That was a close call today."

"Guess the Gamemakers hate her as much as we do."

"What makes you say that?" Peeta asked.

"Why else would they try to force her out of hiding, Peeta?"

Peeta blew out a breath somewhere between a chuckle and a sigh. "You know...that's the first time you've actually used my name."

"Really? Sorry about that." Glimmer didn't appear to care one way or another. "Guess Lover Boy just has a ring to it."

"That's okay. It's kind of funny anyway." Peeta's mind was going through a plan. If he waited another half an hour to make sure the rest of their group was asleep, he could probably force Glimmer into the forest and kill her for the bow and arrows, but what would happen if she made a noise? He was sure that if he tried to drag her away, she'd be kicking and screaming. So don't drag her... Peeta got a glint in his eyes. "Glimmer, have you thought about how this is going to end?"

"What do you mean?"

Peeta lowered his voice down to a whisper. "I mean... Do you really think you'll make it out of this group alive? I know / won't."

"No you won't. They're going to kill you as soon as Thresh is dead." This was news to Peeta, but he didn't care. He wasn't planning on sticking around that long. "They wanted to kill you tonight. They thought torturing you would bring...*her* out of the tree." Glimmer looked at it and rolled her eyes in disgust.

"What made them change their minds?" Peeta had a new found fear running through him. It was now or never.

"Me." She stated proudly. "I figured you saved my life in the fire, so I owed you one." Guilt washed over him, but he pushed it away.

"Would you consider..." He stopped and shook his head. "Never mind."

"What?" She looked at the sleeping group and whispered, "Would I consider what?"

Peeta looked to his sides then back at her. "Maybe breaking away from them? Two against two?"

"Two against *three*." She corrected.

"I'm not counting Marvel. He's useless." Peeta knew Glimmer would find that funny. He wasn't disappointed when she turned her head to stifle her laughter.

She sat for a minute, taking in everything around her and asked, "When would you want to ditch them?"

"The sooner the better as far as I'm concerned." Now! Peeta wanted to scream.

"Okay." Peeta couldn't believe his ears. "As soon as girl on fire is dead we go. We'll take the first watch when we get back to camp, stock up on some stuff and head out."

"Why not now?" Peeta tilted his head down to hers. "We could make a break for it now and they wouldn't know till morning. We'd have hours on them." He was desperate to get her away from the Careers.

"No. We need to make sure fire girl is dead first." Glimmer was firm in her statement. Peeta knew he wouldn't be able to convince her otherwise. His only option was to wait for her to doze off and take the bow and arrows. If he could make it half as far as Cato, up the tree, Katniss would be able to come down and take them from him. He'd be dead before he hit the ground, but at least Katniss would be alive and she'd be able to escape.

"Okay," Peeta agreed. "But you can't give anything away. If Cato finds out..."

"Don't worry about Cato." Glimmer glanced at the sleeping tribute in a provocative way. "I'll give him something else to think about."

Peeta sat with Glimmer for several hours. Once again he suggested they take the longer watch in the hopes that she would doze off. If someone else took over for them, then they would expect Peeta to go to sleep, and that wasn't an option.

He could tell she was getting sleepy, but so was he. He couldn't remember the last time he slept. He willed Glimmer to fall asleep, he was even tempted to tell her to lie her head down in his lap, but the thought of touching her that way made him physically ill. It was bad enough he was trying to lead her on. He actually felt guilty over it, thinking that in a way he was cheating on Katniss. Glimmer's head kept bobbing up and down. Peeta's eyes kept drooping.

He saw Katniss. She was walking towards him and the silver mist that had been splashing about her feet, by the river, was now completely surrounding her. She was talking to him. He couldn't make out what she was saying. He listened harder, trying to focus on her voice. It was weak, but she was giving him a warning. "Run, Peeta." His eyes flew open the second the tracker jacker nest hit the ground. "To the lake, Peeta." She was calling out to him. Glimmer was screaming. Peeta

didn't try to save her this time. He just ran to the lake like Katniss told him to. Behind him he heard the rest of the Careers. They were screaming. He hoped they were being stung to death. He jumped into the body of water and submerged his entire being. Katniss! She was still there. He knew it. He touched the bottom of the lake's floor with his feet and propelled himself upwards. When he felt the early morning air he took in a huge breath and started to make his way to dry land. He had to go back for her. He had to save Katniss. Marvel's sword was on the ground at his feet and he grabbed it as he ran. He pushed through the brush, he could feel the pain of a jacker's sting under his ear and on his chest, but he kept moving forward. Back to Katniss. He saw her going through the arrows as if she were counting them. She looked like Haymitch after he had too much to drink.

"What are you still doing here?" He grabbed at her arm and lifted her to her feet. "Are you mad?" She kept collapsing. "Get up!" He pulled her to her feet again. "Get up!" He could hear Cato screaming at him in the background. "Run! RUN!" He watched her as she made her way into the woods. Away from the Careers. He turned and held onto Marvel's sword with two hands. "All right, Cato." His breath was ragged. "Let's do this!"

Cato's scream was echoing throughout the woods. "You're dead! You're dead!" His sword came down against Peeta's in one hard swing.

"Go ahead and try!" Peeta pushed him backwards and lunged for him.

Cato grunted as he slashed his sword through Peeta's thigh. "I should've killed you when I had the chance!" He yelled out.

Peeta felt the blood pouring out of him. His leg was cut badly and he didn't know how much longer he'd be able to stand. He had to run and hoped that Cato and his crew would chase him. That would give

Katniss the best chance of survival. "You want me! Come and get me!" His adrenaline was still flowing as he ran towards the river, away from Katniss. He heard Cato screaming in frustration and listened as the other two joined him in his search. Peeta fell to the ground. He was tempted to stay there and let Cato finish him off, but thoughts of them turning around and finding Katniss penetrated his mind. He used the sword for leverage and got to his feet, but the sword quickly began to glow so Peeta threw it into the bushes as he ran. The ground ahead of him started to warp. His body seemed to be tilting to the right, but the earth was tilting to the left. He struggled to keep his balance as he made his way to the river. Every tree appeared to come to life. Their leaves began to shimmer as he made his way through the forest. He was getting weak. He knew he had to stop the bleeding from his leg or he'd die, but he couldn't stop running. There were no sounds around him only the bright colors of exploding flowers that showered him in sparkling lights and the glistening leaves. The riverbank was up ahead, he could see it, but the water was filled with swords. He could see the reflection of the sunlight on the blades bobbing up and down as he fell to the ground.

"Katniss," he knew he was dying. He fell face first into the mud as it sucked him into the earth. "Katniss," he tried to call out to her. To tell her he loved her one last time, but he was buried alive in the arena.

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"Told you she was smart," Gale grinned at his little sister.

"Do you think she'll get hurt?" Vick asked him.

"Don't know," Gale worried about the tracker jacker hive that Katniss was going to cut down. "But she's come this far." He smiled at his

siblings and said, "You think she's going to let a couple of bee stings stop her?" He winked at his sister as he lifted her up in his arms. "Come on Rosy Posy, it's time for bed." He felt his sister's tiny arms wrap around his neck and he wondered how Prim was doing. Tomorrow, he vowed, he would find out.

He went to the bakery, the next morning, for the first time in days. So much had happened since he last saw the baker, but after Peeta's display of courage in the arena, Gale felt he owed the man a visit. He knocked on the backdoor and waited for him to answer, but his wife did instead.

"What do you want?" She barked at him.

Gale quickly put the squirrels he'd been carrying behind his back and said, "I'm here to see your husband, ma'am."

"We don't want anything from you, so just go away before I call the Peace...."

"Stop it!" Gale heard the baker yell at his wife from inside the bakery.

The woman turned to her husband and said, "I don't want these Seam..."

Once again the woman was interrupted. "Go inside," the baker's voice was low and powerful. When his wife didn't move he repeated himself. "Go inside."

In all the years Gale had been coming to the bakery, he'd never seen the woman say one nice word to anyone, least of all her family. Gale wondered how Peeta turned out to be as friendly as he was. The baker was pretty quiet and only spoke on occasion. Even Peeta's brothers were a lot like his father. Quiet and they only spoke when

spoken to. If Peeta hadn't looked so much like his father, he'd question Peeta's parentage.

"Sorry about that. She's not her best in the morning," the baker tried to make an excuse, but Gale knew his wife wasn't her best in the afternoons or evenings either. "It's good to see you."

"You too, sir." Gale handed him the squirrels he had behind his back. "I got these for you this morning. Thought...well...it's been awhile since I've been here so..." Gale was at a loss for words.

"It's been a hectic few days, hasn't it?" The baker stepped outside and closed the door.

"Yes it has," Gale answered sheepishly. He wanted to tell the man how grateful he was for Peeta's sacrifice in the arena, but he didn't know how. "Things were a little confusing for awhile there."

"I suppose it could've seemed that way to some."

"Sir...I wanted to tell you...to say..." Gale swallowed and finished his thought before he could chicken out. "What Peeta did...it was the bravest thing I've ever seen."

The baker's eyes were sorrowful. "Thank you. That means a lot." He hung his head. "Won't be long before the cannon shoots out announcing hi...his..."

"He still has a chance." Gale put his hand on the man's shoulder. "He does. He's still alive and he was smart enough to go to the river."

The baker nodded his head, but they both knew that Peeta wasn't coming home. He had done what he had set out to do. Katniss had her bow and arrows and the Careers were down to three.

"Thank you for the squirrels. Wait here and I'll get you something."

"No, sir. I don't want anything. I just wanted to say thank you and...you should be proud of Peeta."

"I am." The baker went back into his shop and closed the door. Gale headed for Katniss' house to bring her family some much needed food.

Prim came to the door and greeted him with a sad smile. Gale gave her two squirrels a rabbit and some things he had gathered in the woods. Prim returned with some goat cheese and milk. They had barely said a word to each other. He looked over Prim's shoulder and saw her mother staring at the television set.

"Anything new happen?" He asked.

"No. Rue hid her and put some leaves on her stings, but Peeta is..." Prim's eyes filled with tears. Gale panicked, thinking that Peeta may have died while he was out.

"Is he still alive, Prim?"

"Yes. Barely." She turned to look at her mother then stepped out the door a little more. "But I'm worried about him dying before Katniss gets to see him again."

Gale didn't think that Katniss and Peeta *would* see each other again, but he didn't want to break Prim's heart. "I'm sure she'll find him when she's better."

"She has to, Gale. Katniss will never forgive herself if he dies for her."

Gale didn't have the heart to tell her that Peeta had to die in order for Katniss to come home. Prim, like everyone else, knew how the

Games worked, but the thought of Peeta dying seemed to cause her enormous pain. "She'll find him, Prim. She will."

His walk home seemed miles away. When he entered his house he found his brother's and sister watching the other tributes on television. It was the first time since the battle at the Cornucopia that Katniss or Peeta hadn't been a feature on the main screen. They were both lying in wait. The Careers made it back to their camp, but they were passed out. Gale wished someone...anyone would come along and take advantage of the situation. Even little Rue could've killed them in the condition they were in.

He walked into the kitchen and helped his mother with her laundry. It wasn't long before he felt her arms take him in a hug. The last time she held him that way was when he was younger. She hadn't held onto him like this in years. Gale was grateful for the comforting touch of his mother.

"She'll be fine," Hazelle tried to console him. "Once she recovers from those stings, there'll be no stopping her."

Gale hugged his mother. "And then what? What happens after that mom?"

"I don't know, sweetie."

"Prim thinks she needs to find Peeta."

Hazelle had a pained expression on her face when she said, "Prim's a smart girl." He felt his mother give him one more squeeze before letting him go.

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"Psst...Psst...Rue." Katniss called out to the young girl in the neighboring tree. Within seconds she saw her big eyes staring back at her. The girl made a sawing motion with her hand and pointed to the tracker jacker nest. Katniss nodded her head, yes and watched as Rue hopped from one tree to the next without making a sound. Now all she needed to do was warn Peeta, but how. She looked down at the group of Careers and noticed that Peeta had fallen asleep, but he was still the furthest away from the pack, so she took some comfort in that. The girl with the bow and arrows, Glimmer, Katniss' glared at her, she was asleep as well. Some watch guard, Katniss thought.

Katniss picked a few pieces of bark from the tree and tried to hit Peeta with them. Wake up! Wake up! She wanted to scream it at him, but it would kill them both for sure. Instead she watched as he swatted at the bark and rolled further away from the Careers. Time was running out and she knew it. There was only one thing she could do. Before dropping the hive she would yell out to him and tell him to run. He was a good five feet away from the rest of them, and that would make a big difference when it came to the tracker jackers. She packed her gear and strapped her backpack on then went to finish what she started. When the first one stung her on the neck, she swatted at it and tried to pull the stinger out as she continued to saw. By the time the branch was about to fall, she felt the other two stings and knew she was in trouble. "Peeta. Peeta." She didn't know how loud she was, but it felt like she was screaming. No one moved. One last saw of the blade and the branch began to break. "Run, Peeta!" She yelled as loud as she could. She saw his eyes fly open the same time the nest hit the ground. "To the lake, Peeta!" She screamed at him and saw him fly away with three Careers on his heels.

Katniss didn't know how much time had passed since the Careers had left, but she had a bow and arrows now and Glimmer was dead. Too bad she was oozing green slime. She was such a pretty girl. Katniss' mind seemed to be floating in and out of space.

"What are you still doing here?" Peeta came back for her. She wanted to show him her bow and arrows. "Are you mad?" No. I'm not mad at you, Peeta. How could she be angry with him? He got her the bow and arrows. She didn't understand why his eyes turned into pretty little butterflies though. "Get up! Get up!" He was pulling on her arm. Come with me, Peeta. She couldn't seem to find her voice. "Run! RUN!" Why was he pushing her away? He wants you to run, Katniss, she answered herself. Then I guess I better run, she thought as she stumbled her way into the woods.

74th Hunger Games

Challenge: We

Always Were Chapter

15: Memories, a

hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Fifteen: Memories

In this chapter Peeta goes into hiding. Katniss hooks up with Rue. The Careers make a new ally and you find out what the "new deal" was that Peeta made with Haymitch prior to entering the Games. Thanks to everyone for their feedback, for their questions, for their comments, for their opinions, but mostly for reading. It amazes me how many people read this story. I'm floored. Thanks to A! Beta extraordinaire!

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

There was snow on the ground and the giant oak tree was bare. All of its leaves were gone for the winter. Most of the students ate indoors during the winter months, but Peeta and Katniss braved the cold so they could get a few hours together each week. Unfortunately, that meant their friends Delly and Madge had to eat outside too. Katniss had brought an old sheet of plastic and fashioned a shelter in the surrounding trees for them so they could keep warm, but she and Peeta never worried about getting cold. They just worried about getting caught.

"It's freezing out here today. Maybe we should just eat inside?" Peeta hoped she'd say no.

"I'm okay out here if you are. I'm sort of used to the cold. Gale and I sit for hours in it when we hunt." Katniss' head snapped towards Peeta. "But if you're cold...we can go inside, Peeta." She was up and gathering their lunch together before he even answered.

"No. No." He put his hand on hers to stop her. "I don't want to go anywhere." He smiled up at her. The tip of her nose was red and her cheeks had taken on a rosy hue. "There's no place on earth I'd rather be than here with you."

Katniss sat back down on the blanket she kept stashed inside of Delly and Madge's tent. "If anyone came out here right now, they'd probably think we were insane."

"We are insane. It's got to be about thirty five degrees out here." Peeta laughed. "We'll probably get frostbite," he grinned.

"Or pneumonia," she smiled as she moved closer to him.

"The flu." He wrapped his arms around her as she pressed her back against his chest.

"We could freeze to death." She rested her head against his shoulder and snuggled up against him.

"Mmmm..." He kissed her softly against the cheek and whispered in her ear. "Great way to die."

Peeta began to blink. His eyelids were heavy, there was something weighing them down. He tried to adjust his focus on the things around him. He saw the tree. He wondered where the leaves came from. The

tree had been bare just a minute ago. And where was Katniss? She was just in his arms, but now his arms were covered in mud. He attempted to lift his head, but his neck felt as though it were detached from his body so he let his head drop back down. Where are you? He asked himself. It became clear that he was not in District 12 having lunch with Katniss as he thought. The sound of the river below him brought him to his senses. He was in the arena. He was still alive, but if he stayed in the open he wouldn't remain that way and he knew it. He tried to move once more, but a sharp pain shot through his leg and he couldn't help the scream that escaped from his throat. It took his breath away.

The conversation he had in his mind helped him to regain his faculties. 'You're still alive, but barely. Is Katniss alive? I don't know. You'll have to wait until tonight and see if the Capitol projects her image in the sky. You won't last until tonight if you just lie here. I can't move. You have to hide. I can't move. But you have to hide. So hide. In plain sight? Yes. In plain sight.'

Once again he tried to lift his head to see what was around him, this time he could make out a few things. There was some moss, sticks, leaves and flat stones. When his neck gave out he used his hands and began feeling around for items. When he got tired, he rested, but not for long, he knew he was a sitting duck. If he wanted to make it to nightfall he had to take cover.

The mud he had fallen into provided some natural cover for him, but there was still too much of his body showing. He forced himself into a sitting position, biting on a stick he had found to keep himself from screaming. When he was upright it took all of his strength not to fall face first into the mud. He sat for a minute and took some deep breaths then took some of the moss, rocks and mud and shielded his lower body. Though he didn't know it, the moss and mud he had fallen

into became a natural bandage for his wound. The second it was covered he fell backwards against the soft soil with exhaustion. He used anything he could reach to cover himself, but his face was the biggest problem. He needed to breathe. His fingers began to take little bits of earth and stone and mixed them with the mud underneath his body. He placed each piece against his skin, feeling for a bare patch and then pressing the molded earth onto himself. The hot sun dried it within minutes. He trailed his fingertips along his face. When it was completely covered he let his hand drop back down, closed his eyes and let sleep take him over.

His eyes opened when he heard the sound of their nation's anthem. There was no one in the sky, only darkness. "Katniss," he breathed her name and thought, you're alive, but for how long? He'd have to survive at least until tomorrow night's showing to make sure the Careers were dead and Katniss was still alive. He *had* to. He reached out to the patch of damp moss and ripped a piece from it then began suckling the moisture it held within. One more day, he told himself. Hang on for one more day.

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She wasn't sure how many times she had excused herself from the room over the past few days, but Portia knew she wasn't the only one shedding tears in private over Katniss and Peeta. Effie's eyes, though made pink with makeup, were burgeoning on red and Cinna's concern seemed to be accentuated by the gold in his eyeliner. The one member of the team that hadn't shed a tear, who was acting uncharacteristically quiet, was Haymitch. He had been talking to himself, murmuring quite a bit as if fighting inner demons.

Each day Peeta lay in the mud, hidden from view, sucking anything moist he could get his hands on, which he was quickly running out of, Haymitch seemed to get worse and worse. Katniss, on the other hand, had herself a little nurse in the arena. Rue, the young child from District 11, had rolled her into a shallow pit and covered her up with dried leaves. Each day she checked on her and changed her leaves. She opened Katniss' mouth and squeezed in some drops of berry juice, and then Rue would take back up to her trees. Watching Katniss from above, but hiding out from those around her. The day after the tracker jacker attack, Rue went to check on the rest of the tributes.

The Careers made it back to their camp with the aid of a boy from District 3. He had found them not far away from the tracker jacker tree. Marvel and Clove were unconscious, but Cato was awake. Not as alert and fully functioning as normal, the venom from the tracker jackers had caused him to have some hallucinogenic side effects shortly after he began chasing Peeta into the woods. One minute Cato was running after him, determined to finish what he started and kill Lover Boy. The next he was waving his sword in the air, slashing at the snakes that were raining down on him from above. The boy from District 3 literally walked right into their group the next day. When he turned to run away, Cato grabbed at his leg and pulled him down to the ground. He was about to plunge one of Clove's knives into his neck, until the boy said he could help Cato. Rue couldn't make out what the boy was going to help Cato with. She could only assume it was getting the other two Careers back to camp.

Rue also tracked Peeta's blood trail. The team from District 12 almost wished she could see him hidden away amongst the earth, so she could care for him the way she had cared for Katniss, but Peeta had hidden himself a little too well, which was actually a good thing.

"How is he," Effie whispered to Portia over their untouched lunch plates.

"He's dying."

"I don't understand this. We have sponsors. Why doesn't he send in some medication?" Effie's voice was quiet.

Portia shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know." Portia had her suspicions, but she wasn't about to voice them.

"Well I'm going to find out."

"Effie. Don't" Portia tried to stop the woman, but it was too late. Effie was standing in front of Haymitch with her hands on her hips.

"Would you like to tell me what you're doing?" Effie accosted Haymitch.

Haymitch lifted his bloodshot eyes to Effie and said, "What?"

"That boy is practically dead and you're just sitting there doing nothing about it." Haymitch dropped his head and ignored her. "I'm talking to you, Haymitch!" She shouted. "Or are you too drunk to notice?!"

"Effie!" Cinna called out to her. "He hasn't had a drink in two days." Cinna couldn't stand by and watch Effie attack Haymitch this time.

Effie turned her head to Cinna then back to Haymitch and said, "Is this true?" She shook her head and said, "No matter. That still doesn't excuse your behavior."

"And what behavior is that?" Haymitch asked her. "What have I done now?"

"It's not what you've done; it's what you *haven't* done. That poor boy is on the brink of death and you could have saved him days ago, but no. Oh no. You just sat here and let him lay in that mud." Haymitch stood up and walked to the bar and put his hands against the edge of the table. "He's bleeding to death. Probably catching some type of deadly infection and all you had to do was send in some shot or cream or...or...*something*, but instead you..."

"I couldn't." Haymitch choked out.

"Oh, yes you could!" Effie screeched at him. "One push of the button and..."

Haymitch picked up a glass and flung it against the wall and said, "I couldn't, Effie! I couldn't! He made me swear it, okay?!" His hands were shaking. His whole body was shaking. He needed a drink. "He made me swear..."

Haymitch could see Peeta standing in front of him on the rooftop of the Tribute Center not too long ago. He could feel Peeta's hand press against his chest.

"You and I are going to make a new deal." Peeta told him.

"A new deal? I've already stayed fairly sober, boy." Haymitch tried to intimidate Peeta with a look, but it wasn't working.

"Don't try and compare your alcohol with Katniss, because that's what I've given up. I gave her up and the little time I had with her, so yeah...you and me...we've got a new deal. And this is how it's going to go. Katniss and I will earn the sponsors. You go out and sign them up, but... when it comes to directing their gifts...they all go to her. *All* of them."

Haymitch and the rest had agreed that they'd save Katniss in the arena, but if they were going to get as many sponsors as Haymitch thought they would by this whole Star Crossed Lovers thing, there was no reason they couldn't make the arena a little easier on Peeta too. "Look, kid. The arenas no joke. If I can make things better for both of you..."

"No, Haymitch! No. I don't care if you see me lying face down in a pool of my own blood. I swear to God, if you send me anything, I'll throw it away. Got it? So everything goes to Katniss. *Everything*. Now swear it."

"I swear on my life, kid."

"Sorry, that's not good enough. You don't hold yourself in very high regards. Swear on *hers*. Swear on Katniss' life."

Effie placed a full glass of whiskey in Haymitch's trembling hands as he finished regaling the story to them and lifted it up to his lips. "Drink this."

Cinna, Portia and Effie just exchanged heartbroken glances with one another.

"There's nothing you could've done, Haymitch. He wouldn't have used the medicine even if you had sent it in," Cinna tried to help ease the man's pain.

"Cinna's right," Effie agreed. "And..." She cleared her throat. "I was...wrong. I'm sorry I yelled at you."

Portia and Cinna's eyebrows shot up at the escort's apology.

There was a moment of silence in the room until Haymitch said, "Did anybody get that?" Haymitch lifted his head and gave Effie a discerning grin. "Effie apologized to me."

She shoved the drink into his hand, stood up from her perched position and said, "This still doesn't mean that I like you."

Things were slowly getting back to normal for the team from District 12.

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"You're freezing." Peeta unzipped his coat. "Come here." He pulled Katniss into his jacket and wrapped it around her. She curled into him, but the pressure from her shoulder caused him to suck a breath in between his teeth.

"What's wrong?" She turned around to face him. "Did I hurt you?"

"It's nothing."

"It's not nothing." Her eyes were filled with worry.

"It's just a burn." He pulled her back into his arms, but she pulled away.

"On your chest?"

"Katniss, I work around hot ovens all day. I'm bound to get an occasional burn."

"On your hands...arms maybe, but your chest?" Her fingers started fumbling at his shirt buttons. "Let me see."

"No." His hands stopped hers. "Knock it off," he chuckled.

"I want to see." She tried to get to his buttons again.

"If you want to undress me, then we should go someplace warmer," he joked. "Stop it." His fingers were fighting with hers, but his were cold and she was quicker than he was. "Seriously, Katniss." He flattened her hands against his chest as his voice got stern. "Stop." His eyes met hers. "Please?"

"No," she leaned in and kissed his cheek. "Let me see it, Peeta," she whispered into his ear. "Just show it to me." His hands released hers and she undid the middle two buttons of his shirt to reveal a two inch burn mark going vertically up his chest. "My God, Peeta! How did that happen? And don't say the oven because an oven doesn't make that kind of mark."

Peeta wanted to tell her the truth. He wanted to tell her that his mother got mad at him and his brothers for a bag of flour that split open while they were unloading the deliveries. He wanted to say that when he was cleaning it up, by himself, his mother was yelling at him and lifted up the spoon that had been inside of the hot candied syrup she was making for an icing and flung it at him. To let her know that he clawed at his skin trying to pull at the chunk of hot sugar, which had congealed onto his shirt, off of him, but instead he said, "Do you mind if we don't talk about it, Katniss?" He could tell that granting his request was hard for her.

She buttoned his shirt back up and placed a kiss next to the spot where his mother had burned him, she turned around and rested against his chest making sure not to press up against his injury. "Peeta, if you ever want to talk about it...I'm here."

"I know you are." He wrapped his coat around her and leaned his head against her shoulder. "Maybe...one day..."

"I'll be here then too." She kissed his cheek. "I'll always be here for you."

The sound of the cannon caused his eyes to fly open. "Katniss!" He tried to scream out her name, but it barely came out. Was the cannon fire signaling her death? He didn't know. He had to find out, but in order to do that he had to survive.

He needed water. There was no more moss within his reach. You have to sit up, he told himself. You have to make it through the night to see who was killed. It took him over an hour, but he finally made it onto his elbows and lifted his upper body off of the ground. The water was so close to him, but he couldn't reach it. In one swift move he threw his arm out and grabbed a handful of the moss that had been his life's nectar and lay back down. He began sucking at it and let his mind drift back to District 12. Back to the oak tree. Back to Katniss.

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Katniss had been aware of her surroundings for some time, but what she wasn't aware of was how she got there. Had Peeta been the one that applied the leaves to her skin and if he was, then where had he gone? He would never leave her unattended and alone unless the Careers found him. She began taking inventory of her last memories, attempting to decipher what was real and what may have been caused by the tracker jacker's poisonous venom. 'Peeta saved my life. He told me to run. Did he follow me? I don't know. Glimmer was covered in green slime. So were my arrows. No. The arrows were covered in some dried blood, so chances are that Glimmer wasn't

covered in slime. I guess the ants that bored through my eyes weren't real either. What about the leaves? Those are real. They're on your body right now. Did you put them on there? I don't think so. Where's Peeta? I don't know! Well find him!"

She didn't find Peeta, but she did find someone else, or someone else found her. "They're not the only ones that can form alliances you know?"

Sweet little Rue had been taking care of Katniss' stings and hidden her away from the other tributes. It seemed only fair to Katniss that she do the same for Rue. "You have good sponsors," said Rue as Katniss applied some burn ointment onto her skin.

"Haven't you gotten anything yet?"

"No," Rue shook her head.

"You will, though. Watch. The closer we get to the end, the more people will realize how clever you are."

"You weren't joking about wanting me for an ally?" The little girl's eyes lit up.

"No. I meant it." I'm sure Peeta would love having you as an ally instead of the Careers, she thought. "Rue?" Katniss wasn't sure if she should ask, but she needed to know. "How long was I asleep?"

"A couple of days. I changed your leaves twice."

"So...what happened while I was out?" It was a nice way of asking the child who died.

"The girl from One and the boy from Ten."

"And...the boy from my district?" Katniss had been out cold for days. Who knows what could've happened to Peeta during that time.

"He's alive," Rue gave her a little smile. "He's down by the river...I think." Katniss turned away from Rue and said a silent thank you. "Is all that true?"

"Is all what true?" Katniss asked.

"About you and him? Being in love?" Rue made a silly face and dragged out the word love.

"Stop it, Rue." Katniss tried not to let her emotions show, but she couldn't help the smile that lifted up the corners of her mouth or the glow that radiated from her eyes..

"Is it?" Rue's question was one Katniss had been asking herself for quite sometime. She knew Peeta had been in love with her, but was she in love with him. "Katniss?" Rue's voice was just as soft as the hand she placed on Katniss' knee.

When Katniss looked down at Rue, she knew the answer to the question that had been plaguing her for months, but she couldn't seem to voice it.

"Oh, Katniss." There was pity in Rue's voice. Somehow this small child knew the answer without Katniss having to answer. "Does he love you too?" Katniss nodded her head. "Then we *have* to find him."

"I can't ask you to do that, Rue."

"You didn't ask me, Katniss."

"It's too dangerous."

"Look around, Katniss." Rue made a sweeping motion with her hand. "I wouldn't exactly call this the safest place on earth."

Find Peeta. Was Rue really willing to help her find Peeta? Katniss couldn't believe it. "The river?" She turned her head to Rue. "How do you know?"

Rue's face went soft. "I followed his trail of blood."

"Blood?"

"He's hurt. I don't know how badly, but it can't be too bad. I mean...I lost his trail and the Careers don't have him."

"How do you know who the Careers have?" Katniss wondered about Rue's knowledge of what had been going on in the Games.

"Oh, I know a lot about the Careers," Rue smiled.

Katniss' smile matched Rue's as she said, "You're going to have to fill me in, Rue."

She listened and caught up on what the Careers had been up to since the tracker jacker attack. The boy from District 3 stumbled upon them in the woods. Instead of killing him, they let him join their group and now they had all of their supplies in a large pile by the Cornucopia. The boy was so afraid of them, instead of killing them while they were recovering from their injuries he just stood guard. There were nine of them left in the Games. Katniss tried to go through them in her head. The pair from District 2, Rue and the boy from her district, the boy from District 1, the boy from District 3, her and Peeta and...she couldn't remember who the other one was.

Ideas started forming in Katniss' head. She needed to find Peeta, but first there were things that had to be done. It was time, Katniss realized, time to get into the Games for real. She had her bow and arrows now, so food wouldn't be a problem. She had water. She had an ally, who was quite resourceful, but there were the Careers to consider. In order for Katniss to find Peeta, and she would find him, she had to cripple the Careers. She knew Peeta might be injured so it was imperative that she try to give them an edge in the Games, before finding him. It was time to turn the tables around on the Careers and let them be hunted down for a change, but first she needed a plan.

As she and Rue settled into a tree for the night Rue asked her, "What's it like, Katniss?"

"What's what like, Rue?"

"Being in love with someone?"

What's it like? Katniss asked herself. Right now, it's horrible. I'm sick to my stomach knowing he's out there. Knowing he's probably hurt and that he's going to die just so I can go home to my family, but Katniss would never tell that to Rue. So she leaned down and said, "It's the most wonderful feeling in the world." This, she knew, was also the truth.

The sky was void of images, but Katniss mind was full of vivid ones. Peeta smiling at her across the hallway at school. Peeta sitting across from her with his legs crossed after they shared their lunch, drawing a picture on a piece of scrap paper of someone named Mona Lisa. And Peeta's eyes when he told her he loved her. Katniss slipped her face out from behind the sleeping bag and looked at the moon. There was no smile on her face tonight as she whispered, "Goodnight, Peeta." Behind the confines of her bag, she found comfort in the warmth of Rue's tiny body.

On this night when Katniss spoke to Peeta in her mind, it was with a fiery passion. 'I know what you did for me with the Careers and I want you to know I have the bow and arrows now, so don't worry. If Cato comes for me...I can take him. In fact...I can't wait for him to come. I've got a plan Peeta. A good one. So you just stay safe and I'll see you as soon as I'm done with the Careers.'

She whispered to him, "Stay alive. I'm coming, Peeta."

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The first thing Haymitch noticed when he entered the party was Carter Darlington raising his glass to him and giving him a little nod of approval. Haymitch sent him a wink and walked towards Cinna and Portia who were in the middle of a conversation.

"...won't matter at all."

"Of course it will." Cinna said.

"What won't matter?" Haymitch asked, and then stopped a waitress.
"Glass of whiskey, sweetheart."

"Portia thinks that it won't make a difference if people find out about Katniss and Peeta's...friendship, prior to the Games."

Haymitch turned to Portia and said, "Why would that even be an issue?"

"I take it you didn't see what happened earlier?" Cinna asked.

"No," Haymitch's face went sour. "What'd she do?"

"Nothing." Cinna assured him. "Nothing...really."

Haymitch started pushing the buttons on the television set that was built into their tabletop. "How the hell does this thing work?"

"What are you trying to do?" Portia asked him.

"Rewind the damn thing?"

"Why?" Portia asked cautiously.

"I want to see how badly she screwed up, that's why."

"Maybe we should go back to the suite?" Cinna suggested.

"Oh Geez!" Haymitch started letting out a slew of profanities. He knew if Cinna and Portia wanted him to watch Katniss' display in private, she must've done something wrong.

"Come on, Haymitch." Portia guided him to the exit. "No, whiskey!" She laughed to several guests that were giving him a strange look on the way out the door.

Cinna just shrugged and smiled. Saying, "What can you do?"

"Effie!" Haymitch called to her the moment they stepped into their suite, as though whatever happened in the arena was her fault.

"What?"

"I thought I told you to get me if something happened?!"

"Did something happen?" Effie looked at Cinna and Portia. "What happened?" She was just as confused as Haymitch.

"Effie just got here, Haymitch. Don't blame her." Cinna explained.

"Somebody better tell me what the hell is going on! What did that girl do?"

"Who? Katniss?" Effie was completely lost.

"Yes! Katniss! Who else would I be talking about?!" Haymitch walked over to one of the smaller viewing screens and started pushing buttons. "How the hell does this thing....Jesus! Will somebody please...."

Effie huffed out a breath and said, "What do you want it to do?"

"Rewind."

"To where?"

"I don't know!" Haymitch made a face at her and turned to Cinna. "Where am I rewinding to?"

Cinna took the remote from Effie and rewound the television feed so they could watch Katniss telling Rue that being in love was the most wonderful feeling in the world.

"Jesus Christ!" Haymitch blurted out.

"What's the problem?" Effie asked. "I think it's sweet."

"It's sweet..." Haymitch mocked Effie's voice. "Yes it is sweet. If she was in love with him, but she just found out about it, sweetheart!"

"Oh," Effie's face perked up. "That could be a problem."

"I don't think it is," Portia folded her arms and stood back on her heels. "Katniss knows that Peeta saved her life. She even pointed it out to Rue when they were talking."

"When was that?" Haymitch asked.

"Right after she asked Rue about becoming allies." Cinna answered.

"Allies?!" Haymitch's hands flew up in the air. "With the kid?! Oh for God's sake," He moaned. "What else did I miss? Is she in with the Careers now too?"

"No, that about covers it," Portia told him.

"But she mentioned that Peeta's been covering for her in the arena? That she knew about it?"

"Yes," Cinna assured him. "So there's nothing to worry about. In fact... I'm pretty sure her little confession made her seem a bit more..."

"Human," Effie answered without thinking. Her fingers flew to her lips as if she couldn't believe what she had said. "Excuse me. I shouldn't have said that."

"No...no...Effie. You're right. This is good. I'm not crazy about her new alliance, but...the kid saved her life. Can't blame the girl for feeling some type of responsibility to her." Haymitch looked around at the rest of his group and said, "Now you're sure I didn't miss anything else?"

"Not really. Rue suggested they go find Peeta, but Katniss wanted to find out about the Careers first so Rue filled Katniss in on the Careers..." Portia told him.

"Katniss seemed to be *very* interested in that." Cinna interrupted her.

"How do you mean?" Haymitch asked.

"She kept asking all types of questions about their supplies. Where they were. Who was guarding them. How badly were they injured... Things like that." Portia answered.

"Cinna, rewind that video." Haymitch told him.

"Why?" He asked.

"I'm not sure, but there's only one reason Katniss wouldn't go looking for Peeta right away." Haymitch was scratching at his chin. "I think our girl might be up to something." Haymitch lifted his fingers and started snapping, "And somebody get me a damn drink already!"

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"How long until you have to be back?" Katniss asked him.

"I've got about ten minutes. How long until you have to meet Gale?" Peeta asked her.

"I was supposed to be there about ten minutes ago," they both laughed.

He leaned his back against the cold stones of the decrepit cottage they had met up in on the occasional early Sunday morning. "I wish I could make a delivery every single Sunday." He kissed her head.

"Me too." She nuzzled her head under his chin.

"I get it now," Peeta said dreamily.

"Get what now?"

"Why your mom left town to be with your dad." Katniss lifted her face to his. "I'd do it. I'd leave. I'd work in the mines to be with you."

Her fingers covered his lips. "Don't say that, Peeta."

He placed a kiss against her fingers and spoke against them. "I would."

She shook her head no and said, "That would break my heart."

He smiled at her and asked, "Being with me all the time would break your heart?"

"No. Having you trapped inside of those mines would break my heart." She laid her head upon his chest. "You don't belong there, Peeta. You don't belong anywhere near those mines."

"But, Katniss...What if that's the only way we can be together?"

"Then we'll figure out another way."

"What if there is no other way?"

"There has to be, Peeta." She lifted her face to his. "There has to be another way. You can't go into those mines. If you do, I'd leave you, Peeta. I swear it. I would."

"Hey now!" He cradled her face in his hands. "You'd break up with me if I went to work in the mines?"

"Yes. If you went to work in the mines to be with me, I would."

"I thought you said you'd always be here for me."

She let her eyes drop down and said, "Just because I would leave you doesn't mean I'd stop caring about you." Her eyes picked back up to his. "But I would, Peeta. I'd end it," he knew her threat was empty.

"Well, I can't have that, now can I?" He smiled down at her and placed a kiss on the tip of her nose. She shook her head no. "Okay, Katniss. We'll find another way. We will, Katniss."

His eyelids fluttered open when the start of the anthem began to play. "Katniss," his voice was weak. He forced himself to stay conscious for the images that would be appearing any minute before him, but he was too tired. He didn't see any faces in the sky that night. The only face he saw was Katniss' in his dreams as she walked to him surround by a silver mist. She was calling to him. She was saying something to him...telling him something. He struggled to hear her words. He saw her lips moving, but the sound was muffled and then it came to him like she was calling to him on a breeze. "Stay alive. I'm coming, Peeta."

74th Hunger Games

Challenge: We

Always Were Chapter

16: Rue, a hunger

games fanfic |

FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Sixteen: Rue

Katniss and Rue strike up a plan for hurting the Careers. Gale comes to some conclusions and Peeta is trying to stay alive. Thanks to S and A for being my beta readers. Their questions and corrections make for a much more enjoyable story.

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

"You call that a work of art?"

"It is a work of art." Peeta chuckled as he took the piece of paper with the sketch he had drawn on it and turned it towards Katniss. "Look at her. See how the artist captured what she was thinking...feeling in that moment. It's...beautiful. She's beautiful."

Katniss looked at the picture, looked at Peeta then back at the picture again. "Peeta, if you think she's beautiful, I'm going to have to question your taste in women."

"I have great taste in women." He reached over and pecked her on the cheek. "Well...one woman."

Katniss rolled her eyes at him and said, "Seriously, she could've smiled or something." She picked up the sketch and examined it. "She looks grumpy."

Peeta laughed and said, "She does not."

"Sure she does." Katniss put the sketch back down. "Like she was mad at the guy that painted the picture of her or something."

"She looks thoughtful..." he picked up the sketch and stared at it. "...like she's wondering about something...someone. Maybe she has a secret and she doesn't want to share it?" Peeta turned and faced Katniss. "That's the beauty of art. It makes you think. It makes you wonder...what was going through that person's mind when they sat for their portrait?"

"I can tell you what I'd be thinking if I had to sit for hours and hours just so somebody could paint a picture of me. I'd be thinking, I'm grumpy and I hate the guy that's painting this picture of me." They both laughed.

"Did you know this was one of the few pieces of art that was saved after the wars? There are only six pieces of art left from before the Dark Days and the Mona Lisa is one of them. My favorite one though is called Starry Night. I'll have to show it to you sometime."

"Why'd they bother saving art? It's not like you can eat it or anything."

"Because..." The expression on Peeta's face looked like he was trying to find an explanation. "Art's important, Katniss."

"I'm not saying art doesn't have its place in the world. I'm sure it does. All I'm saying is that a person can't survive off of a painting. It's not like Mona Lisa here is going to feed you."

"But it does, Katniss." Peeta got a far off look in his eyes. "It feeds your soul."

Katniss remembered the look on Peeta's face as he described his love of art to her. The way his eyes glowed when he started to draw the sketch on a piece of paper. She had never seen anything like it before. The memory of that day, of Peeta's face, was lingering in her mind as she gathered plants from the woods with Rue. There was a small patch of the blue flowers that matched his eyes by a tree, but she didn't pick any of them. This time when she saw them, she thought of the passion Peeta had for art. It stoked the fire within her. Today she would find Peeta. She would let him know how she felt. She would say goodnight to *him* and not to the moon. But first...today...the Careers, she vowed, would pay. A hint of a smile played at the corner of her lips. The Careers would be sorry they ever underestimated her.

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"You sure this'll work, Three?" Cato asked.

"It should." The boy nodded and followed up with. "Yes." There was a tremor in his voice. "It will. It'll work."

"It better work," Clove warned him.

Cinna's sketches came to a complete halt when he saw the boy from District 3 tinkering with the platforms the tributes stood on at the start of the Games. "Portia? What's he doing?"

"Hmmm..." Portia had fallen asleep on the sofa next to him.

"Portia," Cinna spoke a little louder and shook her by the shoulder.
"What is that boy from District 3 doing?"

Portia focused her eyes onto the television screen and tried to make out what Cinna was talking about. "I'm not sure." She sat up and looked closer. "What would be of interest to him under those plates?"

"I don't know," Cinna answered.

"We should find Haymitch," Portia suggested.

"He's still going through Katniss' video feed with Rue."

"How many times is he going to watch that?" Portia stood up and straightened her skirt out.

"He's convinced Katniss is up to something." Cinna looked up at Portia and said, "Still...you should get him."

"No need." They both jumped when they heard Haymitch's voice. "I'm here." He glanced at the television screen and shook his head. "This is trouble."

"What's he doing?" Cinna asked.

"District 3. Electronics, automobiles..." Haymitch pointed to the screen with his chin and headed to the bar to pour a large glass of whiskey.
"...and explosives."

"Explosives?" Portia questioned him, but answered herself within seconds. "Oh no."

"Yup," Haymitch gulped his drink.

"Katniss wouldn't go after the Careers. She's too smart for that," Cinna tried to convince himself.

"Don't know about that." Haymitch began shaking his head back and forth. "The girl's up to something. She's..." He squinted his eyes and started jabbing his finger into the air. "I can't put my finger on it, but...This..." He turned his attention to the screen. "This is going to be a problem."

They watched as the boy dismantled the mines. Once they were free from triggering he instructed the others on where to move them.

"That's a good job for you, Marvel." Cato laughed.

"Why me?" Marvel complained.

"It'll take two of us," the boy from District 3 informed them. His eyes were shifting back and forth amongst the Careers. "If one of you could help me move it..." he gestured to the first bomb, "...I should be able to set the triggers fairly quickly after that."

The process was tedious, but the boy's fingers were swift. After the first three devices had been moved the male tribute from District 3 showed a little sign of relaxing, but his eyes continued to dart between his work and the Careers.

With each mine that was moved, Haymitch wished the kid from District 3 would grow a set and blow up one of the Careers, but it was evident in his body language that he was terrified of the group. Making an attempt on their lives would never enter the kid's head.

Haymitch couldn't help but think of Peeta. How different the two tributes were. The boy from District 3, scared for his own life and willing to work side by side with the Careers, prolonging the inevitable,

his own death. And then there was Peeta. Had Peeta been the one in charge of dismantling the bombs, he probably would've convinced the Careers to move them without his aide and blown them to bits. Haymitch had assumed he was a typical town kid when he first saw him on the train, but Peeta had shown him how wrong first impressions could really be. Haymitch and Katniss would butt heads more often than not, but Peeta was easy to get along with. He had a carefree spirit about him, even going into the Games; he still hung onto his sense of humor yet maintained his focus. People liked him. Hell, Haymitch liked him. Saying goodbye to Peeta, Haymitch realized, was going to be painful. He couldn't even imagine how Katniss was going to handle it.

"That should do it," the boy from District 3 announced. "Just make sure you keep your distance. It won't take much to set these off."

Haymitch shook his head in disbelief at the boy's warning to the Careers. No, Peeta would've never warned them. He would've pushed them onto the bombs and gotten Katniss that much closer to home.

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"It's the most wonderful feeling in the world." Katniss' statement was echoing through Gale's head since he heard her say it earlier in the evening. When the girl from District 11 asked her if she had been in love with Peeta, Katniss seemed to avoid answering the question with words, but the expression on her face had Gale wondering...no...knowing what the answer was.

Since the night of the fire Gale had taken up sleeping on the sofa, with the television on in the background. Tonight he wished he had gone up to bed. Was Katniss actually in love with Peeta or was she simply

having feelings for him out of gratitude. She had said it herself, Peeta saved her life. He joined the Careers and threw them off of her trail. Gale tried to put himself in her place. How would he feel if someone like Madge were in the arena with him and risked her life just to save him? He'd feel like he owed her something more than just a thank you, but love? There was no way he could ever feel that way for someone like Madge, but she wasn't as friendly as Peeta. And when it came right down to it, he and Madge weren't in the arena. Katniss and Peeta were.

Katniss and Peeta. He hated saying their names together. Lately, that's all he heard. It wasn't just Katniss *or* Peeta. It was always, Katniss *and* Peeta or Peeta and Katniss. It was as though they couldn't exist as a separate entity anymore. Catnip would hate that, he thought. She'd hate being associated with someone else all the time. Then again, she was usually associated with Gale. So he wasn't exactly sure if Katniss would hate it, or if he was the one that would hate it.

"It's the most wonderful feeling in the world." Gale heard her voice again, only this time it came from the television set. "That was Katniss Everdeen, speaking about her fellow tribute from District 12, Peeta Mellark." Caesar Flickerman was speaking with head Gamemaker Seneca Crane. "In all the years I've watched the Games, I must say Seneca, I've never experienced anything like this. Two tributes, in love with one another."

Seneca was nodding his head in agreement with Caesar.

"Tell me, Seneca...what do you make of this?"

Seneca took a moment then said, "Like the rest of you, I can't help but feel for the pair. Knowing that the person you love is putting their life at risk so you can survive...is there a bigger testament of love, Caesar?"

Gale shut the television set off. He was disgusted. Of course the Capitol would try to put a spin on it. Try to make Peeta's dying seem romantic as opposed to what it really was; a punishment on the people of his district for fighting back so many years ago. Gale wasn't a fan of Peeta's, in fact, since the reaping, Gale's feelings for Peeta ranged from pure gratitude to wishing he were dead...which Peeta almost was. Gale honestly didn't know how he had survived without food or water for as long as he had. The most he'd had for nourishment was what he could get off of the terrain within his arm's length. Peeta was dying, and Gale was fine with that. The question was would Katniss be okay with Peeta's death? And was she really in love with Peeta or was it all a big show? A way to manipulate sponsors and get a leg up in the Games?

Gale placed his thumb and index finger on his eyes and began to rub. If you *do* love him, Catnip...will you be able to find a place in your heart for me after he's dead? A mass confusion of thoughts was rolling around Gale's head. Everyone he knew seemed to think Katniss had feelings for Peeta, including his own mother. She tried to talk to him earlier in the night, to help him through what they had seen on TV, but Gale didn't want to hear it.

"The heart wants what the heart wants, Gale. And if Katniss' heart wants Peeta..."

"It doesn't, mom."

"Gale," she placed her hand on his shoulder as he sat with his head in his hand. "No one really knows what's going on out there...but..."

"There is no but. I know Katniss, mom." He stood up and walked into the kitchen for a glass of water. His throat had become unnaturally dry. "I've known her for years. There's no way she'd have these kinds of feelings for someone after a few days in the arena."

"It's been more than a few days, Gale. They've been gone for..."

"I know how long they've been gone."

"Have you ever thought that maybe there was something there before...that maybe..." His mother had been dancing around that subject for days and it bothered the heck out of him.

"No. There was nothing there. Nothing." Gale knew when he said those words; he was trying to convince himself just as much as he was trying to convince his mother. "You'll see, mom. When she comes home..." Gale smiled at his mother and continued, "...things will go back to the way they were before."

As Gale lay in the dark, he wondered if their lives could ever go back to the way they were before the Games. Before Peeta Mellark.

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"Do you really think it'll work, Katniss?" Rue asked her with a hint of excitement in her eyes.

"I don't know, but if you're not comfortable helping..."

"Oh no, Katniss. I want to help. It's just..." Rue's expression turned to concern. "Even if you could get to the food, how would you get rid of it?"

"Burn it." Katniss' was feeling determined to destroy the food and supplies the Careers had piled up by the Cornucopia. "Dump it in the lake. Soak it in fuel." She tickled Rue and said, "Eat it!" It had been the first time in days she had laughed. She had forgotten how good it felt.

"Don't worry. I'll think of something. Fortunately for us, destroying things is much easier than making them."

"I can make something," Rue said with a grin.

"Oh really?" Katniss started digging for some roots while Rue gathered berries. "What can you make?"

"Music," Rue said proudly.

"Music?" Katniss wasn't sure why music was such an important factor in Rue's life, but it seemed to make her happy. A long time ago, it made Katniss happy too. On occasion Prim could wheedle a song out of her and though Peeta tried, Katniss never really sang in front of him. Her heart filled with regret when she thought of all the times he asked her to sing for him and she said, no. Playing it off like he was silly for asking.

"Oh yes. I love to sing. We sing all the time."

"You have a lot of time for that?"

"You don't need a lot of time to sing," Rue giggled. "We sing at home. At work too. That's why I love your pin." She pointed to the district token Katniss had been given by her friend Madge.

"You have mockingjays?"

"Yes. Some of them are my special friends. We sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me."

Katniss sat back on her haunches and asked, "What do you mean?" She listened as Rue told her about working in the fields. How she was usually the highest one up in the trees which meant she could see the flag that symbolized quitting time first. When she told Katniss about

the special song she shared with the mockingjays, Katniss couldn't help but wonder why there wasn't a line of people volunteering for Rue at her reaping. The young girl stirred something in Katniss. A need to protect...to nurture her. She had almost decided against bringing Rue in on the plan against the Careers until she realized that the Careers were a danger to Rue as well, so hitting them where it hurt was a necessity.

They spent their day going over the plan, and when it was ready they took action. They devised a signal to let the other know they were okay, a simple four note song that Rue sang to signal quitting time back home in District 11, then said their goodbyes, but when Rue hugged Katniss, a piece of her melted. Once again she was tempted to forget everything about their plan. Instead she squeezed Rue back and put on her Games face. "I'll see you later."

Once Rue was gone, Katniss went on the hunt. Her eyes were keen. Her ears sharp. Her hunter's senses were on full alert. I'm coming for you, Cato, she thought to herself and a wicked grin crossed her face as she patted her bow. I'm coming.

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Peeta closed his eyes when he heard a noise in the bushes close to him. He didn't know who it was, but he knew he'd have to take a peek and see if it was Katniss. It wasn't. It was the little girl from District 11. She had been gathering some berries from the bushes that surrounded him. Peeta closed his eyes, thinking, it was too bad he couldn't reach the berries. They would probably keep him alive a lot longer than the surrounding earth. When a few of the fruit dropped to the ground and rolled towards his head, he closed his eyes, knowing that the condition he was in, even this child could kill him. He had to

hold on though. Katniss needed him to hold on. Something inside of him told him that she was trying to find him.

Thoughts of their time together back home had been invading his dreams. There were so many moments they had together. Little blips in time, when added all together, equaled a lifetime of love as far as Peeta was concerned. He could hear Katniss laugh in the distance. It was soft and melodic. She didn't laugh often, but when she did, it made Peeta's heart soar knowing he could bring that out in her. He opened his eyes when he realized that her laugh hadn't been a figment of his imagination. It was real.

"Katniss," he tried to call out to her, but his voice was barely audible. "Katniss."

A child's laughter joined hers and Peeta realized that Rue was laughing too. Had Katniss and Rue joined forces in the arena? The thought of this brought a smile to his face. The two tiniest tributes in the Games were probably the two that should be feared the most. He didn't know how Rue got her seven during her training session with the Gamemakers, but she must've done something impressive to score only one point below him.

Their voices were disappearing. They were getting quieter and Peeta knew they were traveling away from him. He wanted to scream out to her, "Katniss." He tried to sit up, but the mud that had surrounded him felt like it weighed a ton and he could no longer move as freely as he could the day before. "I'm here, Katniss." He whispered as sleep took him over.

He saw her standing in the hallway at school. She was talking to Gale. Peeta felt a surge of jealousy rush through him as he always did when he saw Gale, but this time it was different. This time it consumed him. His friends were talking to him, but he paid them no mind, he was too

busy watching Katniss. Gale said something to her and she smiled at him. It wasn't a big smile. It barely reached her eyes, but it was enough to drive Peeta crazy. As the students dispersed around him, heading off to their classes, he lingered in the hallway, waiting to see where Gale would go. Where Katniss would go. He knew where she was supposed to be, she was supposed to go to history class. They sat four seats apart. When Gale started walking away from Katniss she turned and saw Peeta staring at her. He didn't look away. He couldn't. Her eyes always seemed to haunt him. Now more than ever before.

She started walking towards him and as she passed him she whispered, "You're going to be late for class."

Peeta walked a few feet behind her. "So are you," his eyes were focused straight ahead.

"Maybe I'm not going to class today," she turned and walked down a hallway leading to the exit.

Peeta's eyes darted up and down the halls to see if there were any teachers around. "Where are you going?" He whispered loudly. She just kept walking. In all his years at school, Peeta had never skipped a class, but after a moment's hesitation, he followed Katniss out of the building and into the fresh spring air. She ran to the side of the building and waited for him. When he ducked around the corner she wrapped her arms around him.

"What took you so long?" She chuckled in his ear.

"Katniss, we're going to get in trouble."

She grabbed his hand and pulled him away from their school building. "Only if we get caught."

They went to the shelter she had devised for Madge and Delly and hid away from sight.

"I've never done this before," Peeta admitted.

"Cut class?"

"Yeah."

"Of course you haven't," Katniss replied dryly. "You're too good for that."

Peeta was a bit embarrassed and said, "Is there something wrong with being good?"

"No," she lay down on the blanket and put her hands under her head. "That's one of the reasons I like you so much."

Peeta lay down next to her on his back and said, "Because I'm a good person?"

"Not just that...I mean...you're a good person, but...you follow the rules." Katniss rolled over onto her stomach and propped herself up on her elbows. "Everyone I associate with are pretty much rule breakers." She looked at Peeta. "We have to be in order to survive. But not you."

Peeta looked away from her and said, "Do you prefer rule breakers?" What he meant was, do you prefer Gale?

"Normally I do. I understand them." She flopped back down on her back. "But for some reason...I understand you too." She rolled her head towards his, placed her hand on his cheek and turned his face towards hers. "The weird thing is...you understand me more than

anyone else does." She dropped her hand and said, "Why do you think that is, Peeta?"

"I don't know," He turned onto his side and started playing with her braid. "I guess I just...I get you. I know what makes you tick."

"And what makes me tick?"

"The need to survive."

"That makes everybody tick, Peeta."

"Not like you. You have this...I don't know how to describe it. It's like most people go through life with flashes of passion, but you live your whole life full of it. It's what makes you so special. It's why people love you."

"People do not love me," Katniss rolled her eyes.

"Yes they do," Peeta's voice was gentle. "They do, Katniss." He rolled her on to her side to face him. "You draw people in. They want to get to know you but..." He wasn't sure if he should finish his statement.

"But what?"

"You tend to..." he hemmed and hawed for a moment then finished. "...intimidate people."

"Intimidate people?" She sat up. "Are you saying I'm scary?" She looked like she was taking pleasure out of the comment.

"To some people."

"Do I frighten you?" She looked over her shoulder at him.

He wrapped her braid around his hand. "No. Not in the least, but I know what you're afraid of."

"Me?" She smiled coyly at him and put on a brave face. "I'm not afraid of anything."

"Yes you are, Katniss."

"And what do you think I'm scared of?"

He tugged gently on her braid and pulled her down until her face was a breath away from his. "Me." He watched her eyes as they went from shock to fear. He released her braid and trailed soft kisses from the corner of her mouth to her ear. "Am I wrong, Katniss?" She didn't move. He could feel her breathing against his skin. "Tell me I'm wrong." He trailed his hand down her arm and took her hand in his. "Tell me you're not afraid of the person you become when you're with me." She pulled away from him and looked into his eyes. He could tell she was petrified of everything he was saying.

"Peeta..." her voice was soft. Her breath was coming out in little tufts of air. "How do you..."

"I know you, Katniss." His hand caressed her cheek. "Better than you know yourself." He watched her as she slowly came to accept his intimate knowledge of her. She closed her eyes as she laid her cheek against his. He brushed his nose against her ear and whispered into it, "Don't worry." His lips lingered against her earlobe. "Your secret's safe with me."

Peeta was brought back to reality when he heard a loud booming noise. It wasn't a cannon. At least he didn't think it was. Or was it? And if it was, did that signal the death of Katniss or her new friend?

His need to survive had been slowly waning, but his desire to make sure Katniss was still all right outweighed his personal needs.

There was no more moss, nothing within reach that could provide him any form of nourishment. He let his hands feel around him and when his fingers touched a small handful of the berries Rue dropped, he thought, I can do this. One more night.

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Gale couldn't stay home. He was too antsy. The fence separating the woods from their district had been turned on more often than not lately; probably due to the amount of electricity the Capitol was supplying them for the Games. So Gale made his visit to the woods quick, only getting what was essential for Katniss' family as well as his own.

After dropping off the provisions, he went to the Hob. He had intended on trading a few squirrels to Greasy Sae, but the moment he walked into the place he heard Peeta's name.

"Always thought Peeta was a good kid. He'd be good for Katniss. Help to tame her a bit." Laughter followed.

Gale stared straight ahead, not wanting to know who it was that made the comment, but trying to ignore one voice was useless. Peeta and Katniss were the topic of conversation amongst the entire crowd. Gale was livid. These were Katniss' people. Gale's people. Not Peeta's, but you wouldn't know that from the bits of conversation he picked up on.

"It was pretty smart of him to disguise himself in that mud bank."

"He's not what I thought he'd be, considering he came from town and all."

"Katniss and Peeta..." Gale's eyes closed and his head dropped backwards. There it was again. Katniss and Peeta. He was sick of it. By the time he made it to Greasy Sae's booth, he couldn't wait to leave the Hob however, Darius, the Peacekeeper, was standing next to Sae and eating a bowl of her stew.

As Gale walked up to the booth he overheard a bit of the pair's conversation.

"I'm telling you, I've seen them coming out of that old stone cottage together just four Sundays ago."

"That doesn't mean a thing. He could've been making a trade with her." Gale knew the moment they were aware of his presence. "Hush, up now Darius. I've got a customer." Sae's eyes met Gale's. "Hello, boy."

"Sae." Gale turned to Darius and greeted the man. "Darius." He made no mention of their brief encounter by the woods.

Gale made his trade and tried to block out everyone around him. Ignoring those that wanted to stop him and talk about the Games, but Darius and Sae's conversation was nagging at him. Had they been talking about Katniss and Peeta too?

Gale kicked at rocks as he walked. He wondered if Katniss was doing okay, but if he went home, he knew his mother would be dissecting his every move, so he walked into town thinking, he might as well watch the Games on the large screen for a little while. He hadn't been paying much attention to them that day. He was downright avoiding them in fear that Katniss might find Peeta and proclaim her love to him. Since

she had gotten a bow and arrows, he was worried about her wellbeing, but he knew she could kill anyone that got in her way. No one could shoot like his Catnip.

He walked into the town square just as Katniss watched the Careers leave the Cornucopia. Gale's nerves immediately were on edge. "What's she doing?" He asked no one in particular.

"Haven't you been watching?" Someone next to him answered. Gale shook his head, no. "Her and that girl from Eleven are planning on taking out the Careers supplies, but there's mines surrounding the pile."

Gale's eyes felt as though they were bugging out of his head. Are you crazy, Catnip? He wanted to shake some sense into her. To tell her, you don't go looking for a fight with a Career. You defend yourself when they come after you. You don't attack them, but Gale saw the familiar look on Katniss' face. The look of a hunter and suddenly Gale was no longer worried about Katniss attempt to go after the Careers. He was eagerly awaiting their misfortune. For the first time in a long time, Gale felt like he knew this girl on television. He grew up with her. She was a hunter. She didn't sit back and wait for her game to come to her, she went after it, and the Careers were game. Gale almost felt sorry for them. For what they were about to get a taste of. Almost.

Katniss took in her surroundings and when she saw another tribute sneaking up on the Careers' stash, she paid close attention to what the girl was doing. She watched every little detail. Gale knew this was the mark of a true hunter. His heart was pounding. His breath, quickening. He felt as though he were on the hunt with her. When she took her first shot, he shook his head, knowing it wasn't the one. When she stepped further into the distance, he should've been worried for her; instead he silently had her back, knowing she needed

a better angle. A better shot. When Katniss took her third shot and reached her mark, Gale saw the gleam in her eyes and put all his fears to rest. For a brief second Gale pitied Peeta. He had no clue who Katniss was, but Gale knew. This was the real Katniss. This fierce, passionate girl who would do anything to survive. *Anything*. Including pretend she was in love with Peeta Mellark.

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Haymitch and his team had watched Katniss and Rue devise their strategy for getting to the Careers, but ridding them of their food was still a problem they hadn't yet figured out. The team had gone from their suite, to the party and back again. When Katniss snuck up to Careers camp, they were sitting at their table in the middle of the party.

"She going to get herself killed," Cinna's brow was furrowed.

"No she's not," Effie said as she began pulling at a loose thread on her lace glove.

"Rue's started the first fire," one of the party goers called out.

They all watched as Cato, Clove and Marvel made their way towards the distraction. Haymitch's eyes never left Katniss.

"She's got to make her move," Portia murmured under her breath.

"How will she get around that boy from District 3?" Cinna whispered to Haymitch, but he ignored him.

The only thing Haymitch was concerned with was Katniss. When her eyes squinted at the dirt piles surrounding the mound of food,

Haymitch's eyes squinted. When she looked around as if questioning the circumstances, Haymitch nodded his head and said, "That's right, sweetheart. Something's wrong."

When the redheaded girl from District 5 hopped out from behind the trees and made her way precariously around the piles of dirt, not only avoiding the booby traps that had been set, but the guard that was posted as well, the crowd at the party started laughing and calling things out to the boy as well as his invader.

"Turn around you fool!"

"She' right there!"

"You can do it. Go get that food!"

Haymitch stared at Katniss intently, "See it now, sweetheart?" He spoke softly, as if Katniss could hear him. "It's mined." Katniss' face took on a distorted expression and then morphed into one of knowledge. "Yes," Haymitch said. He stood up from his chair and started walking closer to the television screens, with Effie, Portia and Cinna following closely behind him.

"Come on, Katniss," Cinna murmured.

"Be careful," Effie worried.

Portia nodded her head as if silently telling Katniss, you can do this.

The trio clasped their hands as the redheaded girl from District 5 snuck off into the distance and the boy from District 3 followed after her. Haymitch stood alone staring at the screen in front of them.

"Now, sweetheart. Now," Haymitch quietly willed her. The television screen had a close up of Katniss and a wide shot of the entire scene.

She took aim with her first arrow and it caused a tiny split in a bag of apples. Haymitch's eyes lit up when he realized what she was doing. "Just like the Gamemakers,

sweetheart. Come on!" His hands made fists as his heart raced. A hush fell over the crowd as Katniss stepped out a little closer to the Cornucopia. She took a breath and blew it out between her lips. Took aim. Pulled back on her string and let her second arrow fly. Sighs and calls of frustration bellowed out from the people around Haymitch, but he didn't hear a thing. All he heard was Katniss' third breath as she let her last arrow go. All eyes were on it as it ripped open the bag of apples. They watched as the apples spilled down around the supplies and landed on the mines the boy from District 3 had set. As the supplies blew up so did the crowd. Cheers, whistles and screams flew out around Haymitch as he shot his fists into the air screaming, "YES! YES!"

Cinna, Portia and Effie were hugging each other and cheering. Their faces were jubilant as they were immediately pounced on by fellow guests.

Haymitch stood on a chair and yelled out for all to hear, "And that, Ladies and Gentlemen, is why she got an eleven!"

74th Hunger Games

Challenge: We

Always Were Chapter

17: A Flash to the Past, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: A Flash to the Past

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Seventeen: A Flash to the Past

In this chapter you'll learn a little more about Cinna and Portia as well as Effie and Haymitch. Katniss is waiting for Rue to show up and Peeta remembers an important tribute. Thank you to EVERYONE that has left me such wonderful feedback. I am amazed each time I read it. You make a girl feel purdy darn good! Thanks to S for continually asking the important questions and A for continually reminding me that it's its and not its and lay and not laid. Now...GO! READ! ENJOY!

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

This was Cinna and Portia's first year as part of the Games, but Cinna was well aware of the lasting effects they left on the people involved with them. Not those that worked with the Capitol, there were a few that felt the same way as he and Portia, but most of them enjoyed the Games as much as the residents. No, Cinna saw what the Games did to the tributes as well as the Victors. Though most people thought

winning the Games meant living a life of luxury, he knew that luxury came with a price.

Like so many others, he grew up watching the Games, but he never found the deaths of children something to celebrate. His mother and father had taught him from an early age that life was something to treasure. Their opinions on the Games were always kept silent outside of their home and Cinna was warned not to breathe a word of their discussions to anyone. His mother had been a designer for District 3 so Cinna's love of fashion was inherited. He would sit with her at night and watch as she sketched different ideas for costumes.

One year Cinna asked her why she worked for the Capitol if she didn't like the Games and his mother told him it was her way of helping the tributes. "By designing something spectacular for them, I might be able to entice the sponsors into noticing how unique the tributes are." It was then that Cinna began helping his mother by suggesting ideas to her. When his mother gave him his own sketchpad and set of pencils, she had been in awe of his natural gift.

A year after his parents died, Cinna found his mother's sketchpad amongst his belongings. Inside of it she had written a note to him.

For my son,

Maybe one day, you can accomplish what I never could.

I'll always be with you

Since that day, he had vowed to do what his mother and father believed in. He would find a way to help put an end to the Games.

He began making a name for himself around the Capitol with his mesmeric clothing designs. Within a short span of time he was able to

hire an assistant. He had a list of designers that wanted to work with him, but when he informed them that the interview would be taking place during the start of the Games, all but one turned him down.

The moment Portia walked into his studio Cinna knew there was something special about her. She held herself up in a way that reminded him of his mother. She kept up on the fashion trends of the Capitol, but she added her own personal flair to her clothing, which made her stand out. When she sat down with Cinna to discuss becoming his assistant, he purposely had the Games playing in the background. He watched her as she opened her sketchbook and began showing him her designs. The moment she glanced at the television set, he noticed her slight cringe and how quickly she averted her eyes from the bloodbath. Cinna smiled with the knowledge that he had found his new partner.

After two years of working side by side, Portia had become his equal in every way. Not only were they design partners, but their feelings about the Games were mutual. When they got the opportunity to design clothing for one of the wealthier sponsor in the Games, Cinna saw this as his in, but only if Portia was willing. If not, then he would have to go on without her. Fortunately she saw it as he did.

They had been invited to the coveted party the Capitol threw each year for the Games and as they made their way around they took notice of the Victors. Many of the Victors from Districts 1, 2 and 4 were boisterous and cocky, but the others looked to be troubled. They put on a brave face, but when they didn't think anyone was looking, their smiles dropped and sorrow filled their eyes.

That first year Haymitch introduced himself to Cinna. He had known Cinna's parents; met them during his Quarter Quell and built a friendship with them as the years passed. Over the next two years,

Cinna and Portia's designs were the hit of the Capitol's party, and Haymitch had become a confidant. On the third year Cinna was asked to work as one of the designers for the Games, but when the Capitol offered him District 4, Cinna turned them down. "Fishing is too simple. Perhaps another district..." he suggested, "...something that would provide more of a challenge?" He was asked what could be more challenging than fish and Cinna answered, "Coal."

There were things that Haymitch intentionally kept from Cinna and things Cinna intentionally kept from Portia, but they were all of one mind. The Games had to come to an end.

As Cinna and Portia watched Katniss and Peeta on television, they knew they had been blessed with a perfect pair of tributes. Katniss volunteered to enter the Games to save her sister's life and Peeta was volunteering his life for Katniss'.

Portia took Cinna's hand and said, "Haymitch is finding out about medication for her."

"Does he have enough sponsors?" Cinna sipped at his cocktail.

"After blowing up the Careers' supply, I'd say he's got enough sponsors to send in a doctor." Portia grinned.

"That was something, wasn't it?" Cinna patted Portia's hand thinking, my mother would've loved Katniss.

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Peeta knew that the noise he had heard earlier wasn't a cannon, because it had been followed up with a cannon's fire shortly after.

Something in the arena exploded, but he didn't know what. All he could think of was the Gamemakers must've sent something into the Games to liven things up. Once again he knew he had to make sure Katniss' image didn't appear in the sky. He was prepared to die if it had. He was ready to close his eyes and never open them up again, but something inside of him said that Katniss would get really mad at him if he gave up, so he held on. His body ached. He was desperate to move. He could feel part of his leg going numb. Probably from lack of blood, he thought. He wasn't sure why he hadn't bled to death yet, but he hadn't. He smiled thinking back to the deal he made with Haymitch. Peeta was, in fact, lying in a pool of his own blood and Haymitch hadn't sent him anything from sponsors. He was glad. It would've been hard throwing away medication that could save his life, especially since Katniss was still out there and Peeta had yet to see any Careers' faces light up the sky.

There were only a few tributes left. Peeta tried to figure out who they were, but his train of thought kept jumping off of its track. He couldn't remember who else was in the arena other than the Careers, Katniss, himself and Rue. There was someone important, but Peeta couldn't remember who it was. He began going district by district through his mind.

District 1, Marvel is still left. I should've killed him when I had the chance. Glimmer's gone. District 2, Cato and Clove are still alive. District 3, he couldn't remember anyone from that district. District 4, he killed the boy and Cato killed the girl. Surprising considering they were normally part of the Careers, but Peeta threw a wrench into that this year. The corner of his mouth lifted in a grin. District 5, he couldn't remember either of those tributes either. Nor could he recall anyone from District 6 or 7, but he remembered the girl from District 8. Peeta knew he'd never forget her. He'd never forget the way she screamed in fear when they tossed her around or the pain she suffered from the

wounds Cato and Marvel caused. And her eyes...her eyes were burned into his memory. They were filled with tears before she shut them. Before he killed her. Peeta turned his head and bit back the tears that were threatening to fall. He willed himself to keep going through the tributes, district by district. District 9, he couldn't remember them either. District 10, the crippled boy leapt into Peeta's mind. District 11, Thresh and Rue. Thresh! That was who Peeta couldn't remember. That's who posed as much of a threat to Katniss as the Careers.

Peeta remembered the morning the Careers wanted to hunt Thresh down. It was right after the initial bloodbath. The hovercraft was going to go in to remove the bodies from the Cornucopia and the Careers wanted to go on the hunt. They were feeling full of themselves after their first kills.

"So, what's next?" Peeta asked.

"I say we go after Thresh," Cato gave Clove a menacing grin. "Might as well try to kill him now."

Peeta knew Cato was trying to test him. "Sounds good. Let's go for it," Peeta agreed without skipping a beat. "I say, take him out now before he gets too comfortable in his surroundings."

Marvel glared at him. "Listen to Lover Boy here, wanting to go on the hunt for Thresh."

"How 'bout you, Marvel? Willing to hunt him down?" Clove asked him with a conniving smirk.

"Absolutely!" Marvel picked up a sword and said, "Let's go."

They had walked into the tall grass Thresh ran into after he grabbed a couple of bags from the Cornucopia. The wind caused the grass to sound like it was whispering as it swayed.

Glimmer jumped when something brushed against her foot. "What was that?" She froze and practically screamed, "What was that?!"

"What?" Cato called out to her. His eyes were filled with fear.

"Something just crawled across my foot." Glimmer informed them.

"Think there's snakes in here?" Peeta asked.

"Could be," Marvel started to walk backwards. "Remember that one year when they had pits of vipers set as booby traps?"

Clove stopped moving. "Cato? I'm not sure about this." Terror was written all over her face.

"Think we should go back?" Cato asked.

"We had a big day," Marvel gulped. "No need to get rid of everyone right away."

Cato nodded his agreement. "Okay...let's go back and wait for the hovercraft to finish cleaning up."

Thinking back on it now, Peeta probably could've killed all of them in that field. They were just a bunch of scared kids, but when it came right down to it, so was he.

His eyes focused on the Capitol's seal that flashed in the sky. He held his breath as the anthem played and let it out when he saw the boy from District 3 appear. "You're alive," Peeta whispered. He let out a small laugh. "You're alive." If the Gamemakers had tried to pull a stunt

like the fire on Katniss, it hadn't worked. He looked up at the moon and whispered, "Goodnight, Katniss."

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"What did they say?" Effie was waiting in the suite awaiting Haymitch's return.

"There's nothing I can send her. It's got to be surgically repaired. The doctors think the blast might have caused some hearing damage." Haymitch kicked over a chair and yelled out, "Damn it!"

"She'll be fine," Effie tried to ease both of their worries. "She'll be fine." She turned towards the television screen and watched Katniss as she pawed at her bloody ear.

"Did they find her?" Haymitch asked as he poured a glass of scotch and downed it.

"No. She's still hiding."

"Good."

"They killed the boy from District 3 though," Effie's face turned mournful.

Haymitch just nodded and refilled his glass. "That was bound to happen." When Effie didn't reply he turned and looked at the escort. "You okay?"

Effie had been fine until she saw Cato snap the boy from District 3's neck. The hatred on Cato's face was disturbingly chilling. She feared for Katniss and Peeta both. What would happen when Cato caught up

with them? Would he make their deaths quick and painless or would he be brutal? Effie had a feeling it would be the latter.

"Wonderful," she answered. "Just peachy." She composed herself and put on a smile. "Twenty-four go in and one comes out." The tone in her voice had its usual perky lilt, but saying the words out loud made her stomach quiver. "One..." She needed to sit down.

"That's right, Effie," Haymitch watched as she came to grips with the reality of the situation. "And that *one* will be Katniss."

"Yes." The ache in the pit of her stomach made Effie grip the edge of the chair she was sitting on. "Katniss..." Why can't we bring them both back? Why can't Katniss *and* Peeta come out of the Games alive?

"Because that's not how it works." Haymitch said.

"Pardon me?" Effie asked. She hadn't realized she had spoken her wishes aloud.

"The Games don't work that way, Effie. They never have and they never will." Haymitch told her. "We can't bring them both back no matter how much we want to."

"Well, why not?!" Effie was instantly furious. Angry with the Gamemakers for setting fire to the arena, for giving Katniss an eleven and making her the Careers main target. She was perturbed with the fact that she had no control over the Games, even though she worked for the Capitol and was an important part of the Games, but she was just an escort. The Gamemakers controlled the happenings inside of the arena. "The Gamemakers set the rules! Why can't they change them?" Effie knew that would never happen, but it was how she felt. "I wish I had never picked their names." This, Effie realized, was the root

of her problem. She was a big reason Katniss and Peeta were in the arena and if either of them died, she would never forgive herself.

"You didn't pick Katniss' name."

"Oh, you know what I mean." Haymitch walked up to Effie and handed her a glass of wine. "I just wish they could both come back, that's all." She looked up at Haymitch with sorrow in her eyes.

"Me too." He patted her shoulder and watched as the Careers headed off into the night in search of Katniss. "Me too."

A few weeks ago, Effie's life was simple. She had a job to do and she normally paid it no mind, but now her life had become complicated and she wasn't too thrilled about it. The more she tried to separate her feelings from the Games the more she found herself drawn to Katniss and Peeta. Perhaps, she like the rest of the residents of the Capitol fell in love with their romance. She wasn't sure. What she was certain of, was that she found herself caring deeply about her tributes. Even using the word tribute bothered Effie. She no longer thought of them in that manner. They were people. Good, caring individuals.

Effie drank her glass of wine and said, "Haymitch?" She lifted her empty glass to him. "Would you mind?" Haymitch refilled her glass for her and Effie began taking little sips of the crisp beverage. When she drained her glass for the second time, Haymitch took it from her without asking and refilled it again. This time he brought the bottle of wine back to Effie and left it on the table next to her. She stared at the bottle for a moment, and then turned to Haymitch who was sitting on the sofa watching the television screen. His bottle of scotch was still on the bar. Effie began to study his back wondering about the man who had turned to alcohol for comfort over the years. Was it really so simple to go from a young Victor to a drunken mentor? She wondered.

Effie was beaming with the possibilities her new job could bring her. Once she showed the Capitol what she could accomplish with a lowly district such as Twelve, she was sure to be moved up to a more suitable one. "Hello, I'm the new escort for District 12, Effie Trinket," she stretched her hand out to the only living mentor of District 12.

Haymitch looked at the escort through bloodshot eyes and said, "Don't care, sweetheart," and let his head fall against the back of the chair inside of the Justice Building.

Effie had heard rumors about Haymitch and had seen him at the Capitol's yearly festivities for the Games, but she had never spoken directly to him. She felt it was important that they provided a united front for their tributes. "You should care. I'm going to be working closely with you and I would prefer it if you used my name and not call me...sweetheart."

"How about sweet ass?" Haymitch laughed at his own joke.

Effie felt herself bristling at his comment. "No. Most certainly not that either!" She pulled at the edge of her blouse and said, "If you can't pronounce Effie, then Miss. Trinket will be fine." As she turned to walk away she heard him mocking her in the background. Yes, she thought, District 12 was going to be a challenge indeed.

The first year Effie and Haymitch worked together, she wondered why he continually drank after talking Games strategy with their tributes. He'd give them a few pointers and when they were done, he would pour glass after glass of brown liquid. Effie came to find out that it was whiskey, and when he ran out of that he switched to scotch. In the morning he would use vodka for his juice. When they got to the Capitol it got worse. There was an abundance of alcoholic beverages at Haymitch's fingertips. Effie couldn't stand it.

"Did it ever cross your mind that these tributes could actually stand a chance at winning these Games if you would curb your..." she picked up one of the empty bottles he left on the bar, "...predilection for alcohol?"

"They're not tributes," he murmured, but Effie couldn't make out what he was saying.

"Speak up!"

"They're not tributes," his words were slurred, but she heard them this time.

Effie wondered if the man was experiencing delusions. "They most certainly are."

"No they're not." Haymitch stood up and wobbled towards her.

"They're children. They're someone's children, but you don't see that do you Miss. High and Mighty? All you see is a couple of tributes," he spat out.

Effie's lips pursed as she said, "They are tributes...who could win these Games if given the proper direction. The proper...mentoring!" Keeping an even temper was a sign of a well groomed lady and Effie Trinket prided herself on being one, but Haymitch Abernathy somehow brought out the worst in her.

"Mentoring..." Haymitch mumbled under his breath. "Wouldn't matter if they had the greatest mentor in the country. We still wouldn't stand a chance at winning." He picked up a bottle and began teetering his way back to the sofa.

"At least now I know where you stand." Effie was beside herself. "But I will not sit on the side lines and watch these child....tributes get slaughtered without a fight! I'll mentor them myself if I have to!"

Haymitch waived a hand in the air as if to dismiss her and said, "Yeah...good luck with that."

In the morning Effie was surprised to find Haymitch giving their tributes pointers before going into training. Perhaps, she thought, their talk did him some good after all, but that night, like all the others, he got drunk.

That first year their tributes died within an hour of the start of the Games. Effie blamed Haymitch's lack of mentoring and love of alcohol for their early demise. The next year their tributes survived a total of two days. One of them died the first day and the other was killed on the second day by the Careers. Once again Haymitch spent his nights getting drunk while Effie tried to talk some sense into him. As the years went on, Haymitch no longer saved the alcohol for the early mornings and late nights. It was now a permanent fixture throughout the day and Effie no longer battled with him on a daily basis to try to prepare their tributes for battle. They would still have fights in regards to his lack of mentoring, but not like the first few years they worked together. The fact was their tributes knew they were going to die. More often than not, Effie would hear them crying at night, but she blocked it out. No sense in getting attached to them, she thought, they were just going to die within a few days. Haymitch on the other hand wasn't going anywhere.

Effie's thoughts were brought back to the present when she found herself reaching for the bottle of wine...the empty bottle of wine.

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Katniss was getting anxious. She knew that once she and Rue met up they could then begin their quest for Peeta. She made it to their meeting place, but Rue hadn't yet shown up. She speared a couple of fish and ate them both, knowing she could spear more for Rue. When her skin began to crawl with an uneasy feeling, she chose to climb a tree and wait for Rue from above. As she sat in the tree she remembered her and Peeta's favorite meeting place. Katniss wondered if he was doing all right or if Cato actually caused as much damage as he thought. From the way Cato spoke, he cut a major artery in Peeta's leg, but if that had been the case, Peeta would be dead by now and Rue wouldn't have lost his blood trail. No. There was no way Peeta could've been hurt that badly, she told herself. Her mind wandered as she settled into the tree to wait for Rue.

"I usually meet Gale that day," Katniss said to Peeta.

"Gale," Peeta's eyes took on that familiar look of jealousy that Katniss so despised. "You're seriously telling me that you're going to meet up with Gale that morning and not me?" Katniss didn't answer. "I'm not sure why I expected anything different."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Katniss went on the defensive.

"Please, Katniss. When it comes right down to it...you'll always choose him over me." Peeta stood up and began gathering the trash from their eaten lunch.

"I wasn't aware I had to choose between the two of you." Her voice was starting to rise as was her temper.

"You don't." Peeta huffed out a breath. "Because there is no choice as far as you're concerned. Gale will always be first and foremost in..."

"Now wait a minute!" Katniss put her hand on Peeta's chest to stifle him. "Give me one example of when I put Gale before you! One!"

"Every single time you're with him!" Peeta's voice matched Katniss'. "You think he's just a friend, but a friend doesn't look at you the way he does!"

"He is my friend! Just my friend! And I'm sick of this stupid....thing you've created in your mind about him and I too."

"Stupid?!" Peeta threw the trash he had in his hand down to the ground. "There is nothing stupid about it!"

"Oh...Gale's in love with you, Katniss...you don't know, Katniss..." She mocked Peeta.

"You don't know," he gripped her by the upper arms. "You either refuse to see it or you're an idiot and I know you're not dumb so what does that leave?"

Katniss gripped Peeta's hands and threw them off of her. "That leaves me without a lunch date tomorrow...or the next day!"

"Great. Run away. You're good at that, Katniss." Peeta spoke to her back. "By the way, I've got a lunch date tomorrow. It's with the girl I shared my first kiss with." Katniss stopped walking and turned to him. "Yup," Peeta leaned against the tree and picked a leaf off of it. "You might know her. Delly Cartwright?"

Katniss' forehead wrinkled as she stormed back to Peeta. "That's not funny," her voice was low and full of anger.

"Who said I was being funny?" Peeta picked up the end of her braid and flopped it around. "Don't think she was my first kiss? Fine. If you don't believe me, you can ask her."

Katniss smacked Peeta's hand off of her hair and said, "I will not lower myself to your..."

"Okay, so you don't believe me?" Peeta stared at her and put his hands in the air. "Wait here." Katniss watched him as he walked several yards away and called out to Delly, then turned and jogged back to Katniss. "I'll ask her for you." He leaned back against the tree and crossed his arms. The moment Delly walked up to the pair Peeta said, "Delly, can you please tell Katniss who my first kiss was?"

Delly's face lit up and she answered, "Oh, Peeta. That was me." She slapped at his arm playfully. "Why?"

"No reason," Katniss growled at her.

"Thanks, Delly." Peeta smiled from ear to ear. "Why don't you grab your things, Delly? We can walk to class together."

Katniss felt herself brisling inside. The second Delly was out of earshot Katniss said, "Were you hoping to accomplish something with that stunt?"

"What stunt?" Peeta asked.

"With Delly?"

"That was no stunt, Katniss." Peeta bent down and grabbed his books as well as the trash he had discarded and put it in his pocket. "See ya," He waved as he walked towards Delly.

Katniss watched the bubbly girl greet Peeta. Madge, Delly and Peeta began walking, but then Peeta said something to Madge and left with Delly. Katniss wondered why Madge wasn't leaving with them. Why the girl was leaving Delly and Peeta alone together? Katniss started walking towards Madge to ask, but then she heard Delly's laughter and she felt rage surging through her system. "Peeta!" She called out to him. He kept walking even though Delly turned her head and looked right at Katniss. "Damn you, Peeta Mellark!" She started running after them and stopped when she was just a few yards behind them. "I'm talking to you!"

"No, you're yelling at me." Peeta turned around and faced her. "Is there something you want, Katniss?"

Katniss' eyes were glaring at Delly the entire time she stood there. "I want to finish our conversation."

"My mistake. Thought we were done." Peeta turned to Delly and said, "Why don't you and Madge go on without me?"

Delly waived her hand to Madge as if the girl should join her and they left.

"So...what is there left to say?" Peeta asked. Katniss couldn't take her eyes off of Delly's back as she walked away. "Katniss?"

"What?!"

"Stop looking at Delly like that. She didn't do a thing."

"Oh really now..." Katniss put her hands on her hips. "Not a thing? So kissing you? That's nothing?" Peeta started to laugh. "What the hell are you laughing at?!" Katniss was irked.

"It took you less than ten minutes...no...five...less than five minutes to get jealous of Delly," Peeta chuckled.

"I am not jealous!" Katniss declared as she walked back to the oak tree.

Peeta followed her and said, "Then what are you? Because you look pretty jealous to me." He was beaming.

"Knock it off!" She turned to him. "And wipe that smile off of your face!"

Peeta started laughing again as he said, "Katniss...Delly and I were eight." He took her hands, which she refused to open and he shook them out a little. "Do you hear me? We were eight years old. I dared her to eat a mud pie and she dared me to kiss her while her face was covered in mud."

"Is that true?" Katniss didn't believe him.

"Yes," Peeta smiled. "It's true." Katniss still didn't believe him. "If you want, I'll go grab her before she goes into class and drag her out here to tell you so."

Katniss stood her ground. She was furious with Peeta for making her look like an idiot. Worse for making her feel so much hatred towards Delly, someone who she had actually liked.

Peeta ducked his head down to be at eye level with Katniss. "Doesn't fell too good does it?"

No, she thought, what he just did to her made her feel horrible. She shook her head and said, "No."

"Imagine going through that for eleven years and not being able to do a thing about it." Peeta's voice was tender as he said, "I'm jealous of Gale. I'm jealous. I hate that he can go to your house whenever he wants and you can spend as much time with him as you want, but we have to sneak around behind everybody's back. I hate it and I want it to end."

Katniss put herself in Peeta's place. If he had been feeling the way she had, even for a brief second, she felt horrible for Peeta. She threw her arms around his neck and said, "I'm sorry."

He grabbed her around the waist and said, "Me too. I'm sorry too." He kissed her against the forehead as he pulled away to look at her. "But I'm not kidding. I want to meet your family."

"Okay." Katniss nodded. "But what about your family?" That was her main concern.

"My dad loves you," Peeta grinned.

"It's not your dad I'm worried about."

"Don't worry about my mother." Peeta kissed Katniss against the cheek and put his arm around her shoulder. "I can handle anything she dishes out."

"Peeta," Katniss was worried. "I can't let you get in trouble just to be with me."

"I'm not asking you to let me. I'm going to tell them regardless, so you really have no say in the matter." Katniss turned her head into his shoulder. "Now...I'll convince your mother to let me date you and afterwards we'll tell Gale about us."

"What if she says no?"

"Hasn't stopped us yet."

"No," Katniss grinned. "It hasn't." She placed her hand on Peeta's cheek and turned his face to hers. "Even if she says no, I'm still telling Gale about us."

"And what about reaping day? Still going to meet with him in the morning instead of me?"

"No," Katniss shook her head. "I'll meet up with both of you."

Peeta chuckled at her. "Of course you will. Still can't choose one of us, can you?"

Katniss stood in front of Peeta and said, "I hope I don't have to, but if I do...then I choose you."

Peeta's eyes lit up as he said, "Do you mean that, Katniss?"

"Course I do. Wouldn't have said it if I didn't mean it."

Peeta lifted her off the ground in a hug and swung her in a circle. "When? When can we talk to your mom?"

"Let's wait until after the reaping. You can come over that night. We'll all have something to celebrate, so she'll be in a good mood."

"Sounds perfect."

Katniss placed a kiss on his chin and said, "One more week and then..." She sighed, "...no more sneaking around."

"No more hiding," He leaned his head against hers.

"No more hiding," Katniss acknowledged. "Never again."

Katniss jumped down from her hiding spot in the tree and looked around the arena. It was time to search for Rue. Time to look for both of her allies.

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Gale watched as Katniss got her bearings about her. She kept playing with her ear, so he knew something had to be wrong with it. He cursed Haymitch for not sending something into her. Surely after her display at the Cornucopia Katniss had earned some sponsors. He was certain of it.

His mother had sent his brothers and sister to school. They argued, but Hazelle had won the fight. She always did. Gale on the other hand stayed home. She knew better than to insist that he go to school. He went into the woods and checked his snares, did some gathering, dropped off some necessities to Katniss' family then headed back home to keep tabs on her.

She was searching for Rue. Gale preferred Rue as Katniss' ally. She had a lot of knowledge when it came to their surroundings. Peeta was about as useful as a Career. He was surrounded with berries and water and all he did was suck on moss. If it had been Gale, he would've found a way to get food and water. He wouldn't have let a little cut in the leg keep him down. The longer Peeta held on, the more Gale thought his wound couldn't have been that bad to begin with. If it were, then why was he still alive?

The more he thought about Peeta's actions in the arena the more he found that Peeta was a lot like the Careers. He needed someone to

provide food and water for him. He couldn't find it on his own. Sure he had killed a few tributes to keep his cover, but what if Katniss hadn't been his tribute partner? Would Peeta still have joined forces with the Careers? It wouldn't surprise Gale if the answer had been yes. He probably would've done whatever he needed to save his own hide. Gale failed to acknowledge that saving your own life was the purpose of the Games.

Gale found himself resenting Peeta regardless of what he did for Katniss. Peeta claimed he loved her, Gale knew he did, but he didn't know Katniss. Not the way Gale did. Peeta had no idea everything Katniss went through after her father died. How she almost starved to death. If she hadn't been smart enough to go out and gather plants and face the woods to hunt for game, her family would be dead. Peeta had no clue what it took to do that. He had no idea what it was like to face that kind of fear on a daily basis. No, he didn't know Katniss at all.

To Gale, Katniss was a strong willed individual. She put the needs of her and her family before others, and that's why she broke the Capitol's laws so often. She too hated their government for the restrictions they had put in place on the residents of the districts. She hated the Capitol and everyone associated with it, for the pleasure they took in the Games each year. Katniss didn't let little things cloud her judgment. She was of one mind and when she got an idea in her head, like destroying the Careers food supply, nothing and no one could change her mind. She went into the Games out of necessity. To save the life of her sister, but Gale knew she'd come out a Victor. When she did, she'd be the same person. He convinced himself of that. Her family's wellbeing would matter much more to her than the death of some boy from town even if he did try to help her in the arena. Ultimately it was Katniss that had dropped the tracker jacker's nest onto the Careers. She was the one that pried the bow and arrows out of Glimmer's hands. She was the one that blew up the Careers'

food. Gale never stopped to consider the fact that Peeta was the reason the Careers never changed guards the night of the tracker jacker attack. He never thought about Glimmer's location under the tree or the fact that if she had stayed where she was initially sitting, the bow and arrows would've been crushed underneath the tree's branch. Nor did he think about Peeta going back to make sure Katniss had left the area. As far as Gale was concerned, Katniss had done everything on her own in the arena and Peeta was just another tribute.

"Katniss! Katniss!" Rue's cries snapped Gale out of his stupor.

Gale saw the boy from District 1 rushing towards the child's cries. His counterparts from District 2 were searching, no doubt for Katniss, in another part of the arena.

"Rue!"

"Don't scream, Catnip. He'll hear you." Gale called out to the TV, but Katniss continued calling out to the girl.

"Rue! I'm coming!"

Hazelle's fingers were digging into Gale's shoulder as they watched the scene play out before them. Gale felt the blood drain from his face when he saw the spear barely miss Katniss and go through the center of Rue's frail torso.

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The past thirty-six hours had taken a toll on everyone from District 12's team. Portia had been silently suffering for Peeta. Sneaking off to

the restroom to shed tears or throwing herself into her work, which was pointless, she knew, but it kept her mind busy.

Haymitch had signed up more sponsors; however there was nothing to send to Katniss. She didn't need food or water. The only thing she needed was medication for her ear and he was assured that the damage done to her eardrum was one that needed more than just some drops or a shot.

Effie seemed to be completely disoriented when they were in the privacy of their suite, but when they were in public; she was as bright and chipper as ever. She stopped voicing her opinion about bringing both tributes back home, but the thought never left her mind or her heart.

Cinna sketched. He had more outfits than Katniss could wear in a lifetime, sketched out for her. Not only was he working on what she should wear when she returned, but he sketched out some ideas for the Victory Tour. He was certain, they were all certain, that Katniss would return as the Victor of the Seventy-Forth Hunger Games.

As the day lingered on, something crossed Haymitch's mind. He couldn't send Peeta anything, but he could send something to Katniss. His eyes flashed opened and he said, "Come on!"

"Where are we going?" Effie snapped to attention.

"To sign up some more sponsors."

"What for?" Portia asked. "She doesn't need anything."

"No, but Peeta does." Haymitch said with a smile.

"Peeta won't use the medication, Haymitch. You already said that." Effie's spirit deflated.

"Who said I was sending it to Peeta?" Haymitch waggled his eyebrows and said, "Effie, I'll need you to put out some feelers.

Cinna...Portia...eavesdrop on conversations. Let me know who's talking about our pair." He began going through a rundown of what he wanted each of them to do.

"How will she know it's for Peeta?" Asked Effie. "It's against the rules to tell the tributes about the goings on in the rest of the arena."

"I'll figure something out. I don't know...I just know that kid is dying out there and I can't take it anymore."

As they were exiting the suite Effie put her hand on Haymitch's shoulder to stop him. "Haymitch. What's the sense in saving him now?" Cinna, Portia and Haymitch stopped in their tracks. "It's not that I don't want to help Peeta, but...one winner. Remember, Haymitch? If she sees him in this condition..." Effie sighed. "How do you think that will affect the remainder of her Game? Will she even want to win if he can't come home with her?"

"I don't care about that..." Haymitch began to protest.

"Effie's right," Portia interrupted him. "I want Peeta back just as much as the rest of you do...more probably, but we can only bring one of them back and if Katniss sees Peeta in that condition...hurting...dying...we might as well kill her ourselves."

"But he won't be dying once he gets the medicine," Haymitch argued.

"And then she gets to watch him die another way? Worse yet...kill him herself?" Effie asked in a soft voice. "It'll kill her, Haymitch."

"She's strong. She'll be fine," Haymitch argued.

"You remember how she acted when he cut his hand?" Cinna asked.
"She just...shut down. Imagine if she saw him with that gash on his leg."

"Well, we have to do something!" Haymitch yelled at them. "I can't just let the kid die!"

"He has to," Effie's words caused Haymitch to glare at her. "We don't make the rules. Both of them can't win."

Haymitch began shaking his head. "No...no..." He walked back into their suite and sat down. "I don't know what I was thinking." He spoke quietly to himself. He had told Effie the same thing last night. As much as they wanted both Peeta and Katniss to come back, it just wasn't an option.

"Let's go to the party, Haymitch." Effie suggested. "We've been sitting in here for hours. Perhaps the change of scenery will do us some good."

"Sure," His words were sullen. "Sure. Let's go." He wanted to drink himself into oblivion and if he stayed in their private suite, chances were he'd do just that.

As they entered the festivities they heard Rue.

"Katniss! Katniss!" Everyone turned their heads to the television screens around the room. Rue had been trapped in a net set up by Marvel.

"Rue!" Katniss was running towards the sound of Rue's voice. "Rue! I'm coming!"

When the spear plunged through Rue's body the crowd of guests applauded. Some cheered. Some booed. But they were all swept up in the Games. None of them saw someone's child murdered. None of them but the mentors from District 11 and the team from District 12.

74th Hunger Games

Challenge: We

Always Were Chapter

18: Attention

Tributes, a hunger

games fanfic |

FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Eighteen: Attention Tributes!

In this chapter we've got a little Haymitch history. Thanks S for questioning, thanks A for such quick corrections! You guys are the best betas ever! Thank you to everyone for reading this story and for posting such AHmazing comments. Please remember, this story is based on both the movie and the book so you will find both of that in this story. Oh...and you'll find a lot of me in here too. Nope, don't own HG, but I'm having a blast with it! And now...

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

Effie's fingers flew to her lips as the gasp left her throat. In a matter of seconds Rue had been speared by Marvel and Katniss had turned on him and shot an arrow through his throat. "Oh...oh..." she breathed out. Her eyes were filling with tears.

Haymitch heard Effie trying to regain her composure behind him. He turned to her and whispered, "Effie, people are looking at you."

Effie moved her trembling fingers to her throat as she listened to Katniss and Rue speak to one another.

"You blew up the food?" Rue's words were soft.

"Every last bit," Katniss tried to put a smile on her face, obviously for the child's benefit.

"You have to win."

"I'm going to. Going to win for both of us now." Katniss brushed the hair away from Rue's face.

"For all of us," Rue smiled just as the cannon shot out marking Marvel's death. "Don't go." Rue clenched Katniss' hand.

"Course not. I'm staying right here," there was a catch in Katniss' voice.

Rue's voice was barely above a whisper as she asked, "Will you sing?"

Effie dragged her eyes away from the television screen. She could no longer watch Rue die.

She glanced at Portia who had tears on her cheeks. Their eyes met for a brief second and Effie tried to remind herself that everyone in the arena had to die in order for Katniss to come back, but her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Katniss voice singing to Rue.

The tears that fell from Effie's eyes were matched by those around her. It no longer mattered who was watching her, for they were all moved by Katniss' display to Rue. Her song spoke of a peaceful place to rest. A place of beauty where nothing could cause harm. A place where Rue could finally stop running for her life and rest in peace. When the mockingjays took up the haunting melody of Katniss' song and began repeating it through the arena, Effie looked at the female mentor from District 11. Her face was hard and filled with anger.

Effie began to swallow lump after lump that formed in her throat and when Katniss began putting flowers around Rue's frail body, you could hear a pin drop. Effie looked around the room and took in the expressions from the residents of the Capitol. The sound of Peeta's voice echoed through her memory as he said to Katniss, "*You have no clue, Katniss. No clue the effect you have on people.*" There were tears and sorrow from those that had just been celebrating Rue's death and Katniss brought this out in them. In *her*. Effie no longer questioned why Peeta loved this girl unconditionally. Why he was willing to lay down his life for her. As Effie wiped the tears from her

face, she stared at Katniss' image and realized just how much she loved Katniss too.

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"Katniss!" The sound of the cannon caused Peeta to call out to her, "Katniss!" A few minutes later he heard the sound of another and something inside of him began to churn. No, he thought. She's not dead. I know it's not her. It can't be. He was certain he'd know if she were dead. That something inside of him would die too. There was only one way to know for certain and that was to make it through the night. He was determined to survive until he saw the face of every tribute light up the sky. Katniss would be the winner of these Games. That's when he would let himself die. Until then he needed to fight to stay alive.

His mouth was dry. He knew he was getting dehydrated and his desire for food no longer existed. He forced himself to move. First one arm then the other. When they were free from the mud which had encrusted around his skin, he pressed his hands against the earth and tried to push himself up. Peeta's arms gave out over and over again. The mud seemed to weigh a ton. He told himself he needed to do this. Do this for Katniss. One last time he placed his hands down and pressed them into the soft earth below him. He grunted as he lifted his upper body off of the ground. He would make it, he told himself. He would get up. He grabbed at a rock that was embedded deep within the ground and used it for leverage; pulling his upper body off of the ground. He quickly braced his elbows below him and peered around. There had to be something he could drink. The water was only a few feet away, but he couldn't move his leg without digging it out from the mud. The stick he had used to bite on when he first fell was lying just

within his reach. If he grabbed it, he could use it to reach at the moss that was further down the bank. He took breath after breath, working up the strength he would need to do it. He threw his hand out, grabbed the stick and pushed himself up with his other arm. When he dug the stick into the moss he knew he'd only have one shot. He yanked at the moss and let his body drop back down to the ground. Peeta was panting as he looked at the moss covered stick. He felt the first drop of water hit his throat. He smiled as he held it over his mouth and let the water drip against his tongue. As he sucked it dry he knew he could live another day.

When the sky lit up that night and showed the image of Marvel, Peeta thought, one more down. When Rue's image followed it up the little water he had ingested that day threatened to come out in the form of tears. "Katniss," he whispered. "I'm sorry." He knew she had found a friendship, albeit a temporary one, with Rue. "I'm sorry."

His eyelids were heavy. He had been sleeping a lot more lately. Throughout the night and most of the day as well. If he was going to survive he had to fight the drowsiness. Tomorrow, he thought. Tomorrow, I'll stay awake, but tonight... He glanced up at the sky and took notice of the moon. He wondered if Katniss was looking at it too. If she was thinking about him. "Goodnight, Katniss."

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Haymitch had been nursing his drink for awhile. The beads of sweat were collecting on the outside of the glass, but Haymitch was oblivious to it. There had been something about Katniss since he had first set eyes on her on the tribute train, something he couldn't put his finger on, that reminded him of his own Games. She reminded him a lot of himself, but there was something else. Maybe that something else

was the reason Haymitch thought she could handle winning the Games. He didn't know, but the moment Rue pointed out her mockingjay pin, the same mockingjay pin Maysilee Donner wore in the their very own Quarter Quell, Haymitch knew there was much more riding on Katniss winning the Hunger Games then just becoming a Victor.

Haymitch's mind went back in time. Back to a day when he was young and standing by a big oak tree on the outskirts of the schoolyard in District 12. He was waiting for his girlfriend. It was the perfect place to hide. No one knew about them. If they had, there would be hell to pay. He was from the Seam and she was from town. And everyone knew those two classes of people didn't mix.

"Hey," Haymitch heard her voice and his cocky grin lit up his face.

"'bout time you got here."

"Had to ditch my sister." Maysilee walked up to him and took his hand. "Not an easy thing to do when you're a twin. Thank goodness for my best friend."

"She's covering for you again?"

"Mmmhmmm," Maysilee smiled. "So why do you look so full of yourself today?"

"Just feeling lucky I guess." Haymitch put his arm around her shoulder. "Got the prettiest girl in school. Got a good head on my shoulders and got a little something in my pocket."

"Whatcha got in your pocket?"

Haymitch reached inside of his overalls and pulled out a piece of tissue paper. He handed it to Maysilee and said, "It's for you."

"What is it?"

"Open it up and find out."

Maysilee ripped open the paper and found a gold pin. It was a mockingjay in the center of a circle. It looked like it was in flight and its wings were attached to the top of the circle. "Haymitch, this is beautiful." Her eyes were wide open. "I can't accept this."

"Sure ya can." He reached out and pinned it on her. "It was my grandmothers. She gave it to me before she died. Told me to give it the girl I loved."

Maysilee's fingers reached up and touched the gold pin. "The girl you love, huh?"

"Yup," Haymitch lifted the corner of his mouth in his trademark grin.

"What am I supposed to tell my mother?"

"Tell her you found it or tell her I traded it to you for help with some homework. Don't really care. Your mom's not that bright. I'm sure you can think of something."

"Haymitch!" Maysilee laughed and smacked at him playfully. "She's not very bright, is she?" She giggled. "Oh, I love it." Maysilee leaned in and kissed his cheek. "I'll wear it all the time."

That had been six months before the reaping in which both Maysilee and Haymitch were chosen. During those six months Maysilee wore that pin every day and when they entered the Games, Haymitch warned her not to show any emotion towards him. He was certain if

they had the other tributes would use it against them. It took everything he had to keep his distance from her during their time at the Capitol and even more strength to not search her out in the arena. When she did come across him and suggest they form an alliance he was thrilled to do so. He would've gladly fought till the end with her and sacrificed himself for her, but she wanted to end their alliance and he was young and stupid. He hated himself for ever agreeing to it. For letting her walk away. He still had nightmares about her death. When he won the Quell, by using the Capitol's own force field against another tribute, he had no clue they would be so harsh. They killed his family within two days of his return to District 12. At the age of fourteen Haymitch had lost his family and the only girl he had ever loved. He tried to keep his feelings for people at a distance, for fear that the Capitol would use it against him. The only people he had ever shown any sort of camaraderie with were fellow mentors and a few people around the Capitol, but they had their own form of hell they were dealing with, so Haymitch didn't worry too much about them. It wasn't until Katniss and Peeta entered his life that he felt any type of connection to another human being that remotely stirred something inside of him. God help him, he loved his kids. When he had found out about their relationship Haymitch knew keeping it a secret wouldn't do them a bit of good. Maybe if he and Maysilee had told people how they felt things would've turned out differently. He had thought about that over and over again throughout the years. So when Katniss and Peeta walked into his life he felt like he had been given a second chance and now Katniss was wearing Maysilee's pin. His grandmother's pin. It was as though his grandma were trying to tell him something.

Haymitch turned when he heard the sound of his name. "Seeder. Chaff," Haymitch shook the latter's hand. "Sorry about your girl, Rue." Haymitch meant this. He was sorry about all of the children that had died within the arena.

"Thank you," Seeder spoke.

"Seeder," Effie placed her hand on the mentor from District 11's arm and said, "I'm truly sorry for your loss."

"Sure you are," Chaff the male mentor from District 11 said with a look of disgust on his face.

Seeder gave her partner a warning glance and said, "Thank you. We appreciate it." She turned her attention back to Haymitch and said, "We'd like to speak with you."

Chaff followed it up with, "In private."

"Sure," Haymitch said. "Effie, why don't you go back to the suite? I'll meet you there."

She nodded her head and told Seeder once again how sorry she was.

"Shall we sit?" Haymitch offered.

"No." Seeder looked around and said, "I think the roar of the crowd is perfect for our conversation."

Haymitch knew that Seeder was alluding to the Capitol's never ending surveillance. "Sounds good. What can I do for you?"

"We'd like to do something for you...for Katniss that is," Seeder said in a hushed tone. "The people of our district took up a collection for Rue. They wanted to send her some bread, but now that she's..." Seeder couldn't finish the statement. "They'd like to send it to Katniss instead."

Haymitch had never heard of such a thing. In all the years that he'd been a part of the Games...watched the Games; never had one district sent a gift to another's tribute. "You sure?"

"Yes. The people of our district insisted that Katniss get Rue's sponsor gift."

Haymitch began to nod his head in disbelief. "Um...okay. I...uh..."

Seeder leaned in for a hug and whispered into his ear, "They're rebelling in my district. They're fighting back." She pulled away and said, "Katniss is someone we can all use as an example. Someone you want to root for...fight for." Seeder's message was loud and clear.

Haymitch and his group of rebels had been waiting for the perfect opportunity to start an uprising against the Capitol. They had already been suggesting it in District 8 and now this... "Katniss is a warrior."

"She's more than that," Chaff said. He took Haymitch in a burly hug and said quietly, "She's a rebel."

Haymitch took the codes from Seeder that authorized the transfer of funds and watched the television screen as Katniss received the parachute with a loaf of bread from District 11 in it. When she turned her face to the screen and said, "My thanks to the people of District 11," Haymitch knew she had just signed her death warrant.

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Gale wandered through the woods gathering up as much as he could. There were only six tributes left which meant the Gamemakers would be throwing a wrench into the arena very soon. He wondered if they would aim it at Katniss again or if they were as impressed with her as he was. She had destroyed the Career's supplies and killed the boy from District 1. Sure the little girl died, Gale kept seeing her in her interview dress with the wings, but Katniss made her death a

statement. This is how he knew the Gamemakers would take their revenge on Katniss. He was proud of her. He was sure the little girl from Eleven reminded Katniss of Prim, which is why she buried her in flowers. The thought of Prim gave Gale pause. How was she? How were they handling everything that was going on? He wondered what Katniss' mom thought about her new found romance. If she felt like Prim did about Katniss finding Peeta? He couldn't help but think that Katniss' mother wouldn't want her daughter to risk her life for Peeta. And trying to find him would surely put Katniss' life in jeopardy.

When he left the woods he stopped at Katniss' house and brought them some game and plants.

"Hi, Prim."

"Hi," Prim's voice was forlorn.

"How's your mom doing?"

Prim shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

"Mind if I say hi to her?" Gale asked.

"Sure. Come in." Prim opened the door and let Gale enter. "Mom," she called out. "Gale's here."

"Oh, hello, Gale." Katniss' mother stood up, but barely took her eyes off of the television set.

"How're you doing Mrs. Everdeen?"

"Hmmm?" She sat back down and continued to watch the television set. "Why don't they put her on the main screen?" She worried when Katniss image went to the corner and was replaced with that of Cato

and Clove trying to figure out if some berries they had found were edible. Naturally a fight broke out between the pair.

"That just means she's safe, mom." Prim tried to ease her mother's fears.

"Prim's right," Gale added. "If she were in danger they'd have her front and center."

"You're right." She nodded. "That's true." She finally turned her attention to Gale. "How have you been?"

"I'm okay," he gave her a soft smile. "Been more worried about the two of you."

"We're doing okay." Katniss' mother said. "Prim and I have been keeping ourselves busy, haven't we?" She held her arms out to Prim who walked to her mother's side.

"Yup. And we've been cheering on Katniss and Peeta," Prim added.

Gale's insides churned when he heard Prim's statement. "Peeta, huh?"

"He saved her life," Katniss' mother shook her head in disbelief. "He joined the Careers just to save her life, Gale. Can you believe that?"

Gale choked down the frog in his throat and said, "But Katniss was the one that blew up their supplies." He smiled at Prim. "She hurt the Careers by doing that."

"Yes..." Katniss' mother glanced back to the television screen then turned to Gale again. "I'm not thrilled about this whole romance thing they've played up, but if it'll help to bring her home..." Katniss' image

took up half of the main image again. "Oh, there she is." Her mother smiled and gave Prim a squeeze. "There she is."

"She looks sad, mommy."

"No, she's not sad. She's just concentrating on hunting, that's all." Her mother said with a lilt in her voice. "Katniss is doing what she needs to so she can come home to us."

"Do you think she'll find Peeta now?" Prim asked.

"I don't know, sweetie." She pulled Prim into her lap and placed a kiss against her temple. "I hope so."

Gale looked at Katniss family and wondered why her mother would want her to find Peeta. "If she doesn't find Peeta, it's only because she's trying to keep ahead of the Careers. She probably isn't even thinking about searching for Peeta." Prim turned her head to Gale's and gave him a questioning look. "She's probably just thinking about coming home to you. To both of you."

"No," her mother said offhandedly. "Katniss needs to find Peeta. She'll have to say her thanks. She doesn't like her debts to go unpaid."

Gale wondered if that's what Peeta was to Katniss. Was he merely a debt? "Do you two need anything? I brought some berries and greens and...well...is there anything in particular that you need?" Gale stood up to leave.

"No, thank you. We appreciate all that you've brought to us." Her mother said.

"I'll see myself out."

"Gale."

"Yes, Mrs. Everdeen."

"Did they stop by to interview you yet?"

"Who?" Gale wondered what she was talking about.

"The Capitol sent some people to interview us yesterday and you were mentioned. They seem to think we're related." Katniss' mother kept her focus on the television screen.

"Related?" Gale asked.

Prim stood up and walked Gale the rest of the way to the door.

"Haymitch told them that you were our cousin." Prim looked back at her mom and turned to Gale. "I'm not sure why, but we figured it had to be important so..." Prim shrugged.

"Well...good to know...I guess." Gale walked home wondering why Haymitch would lie about his and Katniss' relationship. It was then he realized that he and Katniss didn't have a relationship. Katniss and *Peeta* did.

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Katniss tried to focus on Prim and not Rue. She tried to remember her sister's features, which were a stark contrast to Rue's. Light hair, fair complexion and her eyes. Prim's eyes were always so full of wonder. She closed her own eyes and conjured up the sound of Prim's voice.

Katniss had convinced Peeta to ditch the last half of their school day after their fight. It was the most time they had ever spent together. They had talked about Peeta's worries which mainly consisted of Gale. Katniss tried to understand and spoke about her own worries,

Peeta's mother. They had talked for hours and somehow Peeta helped Katniss to believe everything would be okay. Katniss had told Peeta they needed to get back to school in time for her to walk Prim home and Peeta had said that he needed to meet his brother so that was fine. They had just made their way out of the trees when Prim came upon them.

"There you are, Katniss. Mrs. Beasterson said you didn't show up for the last half of your classes today so I thought maybe you went home sick." Prim sounded worried.

"Nope. Just didn't feel like going to school," Katniss walked up to Prim and watched as Peeta walked by them.

"....Mellark?"

"What's that, Prim?" Katniss hadn't been paying attention to her sister. She had been too busy watching Peeta walk away, but he stopped and looked at her and when he did, she swore her heart smiled.

"I said, what's going on with you and Peeta Mellark?"

Katniss' head shot around and she said, "Nothing! Why?"

Prim's smile went from ear to ear. "That doesn't look like nothing to me."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Katniss started walking in the direction of their house.

Prim stopped and said, "Then why are you blushing?"

Katniss' hands flew up to her cheeks. "Am I blushing? I am not blushing!" But she could feel the heat radiating from her face.

"There is most certainly something going on between the two of you," Prim turned around and looked at Peeta as he met up with his brother.

"You're imagining things, Prim."

"Oh really?" Prim started tapping her foot and said, "Then look at him."

"What? You're crazy. Come on! I want to go home." Katniss went back and grabbed Prim's hand, but she wasn't budging.

"Just look at him. He's walking right behind me." Prim's voice was light and airy.

"Whatever, Prim. Let's go."

"Fine. You won't mind if I go and say hi to him, right?" Prim started to turn to Peeta, but Katniss stopped her.

"No! Don't you dare!"

"Why not?" Prim gave Katniss a knowing grin.

Katniss blew out a breath and said, "Because...because..." but Peeta and his brother were just a few feet away and Katniss couldn't help it when her eyes were drawn to his.

The moment Peeta was far enough away Prim said, "Oh, you've got it bad."

"I do not!"

"You both do!" Prim laughed and started walking. "But if you're trying to keep it a secret...it's not going to work."

"Peeta and I aren't keeping any secrets," Katniss lied. "We're just...classmates."

"Sure you are and I'm Effie Trinket." Prim shook her head and said, "I hope mom doesn't find out about you two...or Gale."

"Gale? Why not Gale?"

"Because he's crazy about you, or haven't you noticed that?"

"Prim?" Katniss stopped her sister and asked, "Why do you think Gale likes me?"

"Probably because he drools over you whenever you're not looking." Prim glanced in the direction Peeta walked and said, "Looks like he's out of luck though."

"And what makes you so certain I have feelings for Peeta?" Katniss started kicking at some rocks on the ground. "He's from town and I'm from the Seam..."

"Uh huh, sounds like mom and dad."

"We're nothing like mom and dad," Katniss didn't want to be compared to her mother.

"Could've fooled me." Prim paused before adding "Mom and dad used to look at each other the same way you two just did."

"How do you remember that?"

"Because I always dreamed of finding a boy that would look at me the way dad looked at mom. Like the whole world revolved around her." Prim sighed.

"You were just a kid! You're still a kid!" Katniss laughed.

"I might be a kid, but I'm also a girl." Prim reached out and took Katniss' hand in hers. "So...you going to tell mom about him?"

Katniss smiled down at her sister and said, "We're talking to her after the reaping, but you can't say a word!"

"My lips are sealed," Prim pretended to lock her lips closed. When they were almost home Prim said, "I guess now I know why you've been smiling lately. It's nice to see you that way...happy."

Katniss hugged Prim and said, "When did you get so smart?"

"I've always been the smart one." Prim tickled Katniss in the ribs and said, "You're the pretty one."

Katniss wondered if Prim broke her word and told her mother about Katniss and Peeta now that their romance was such a big part of the Games. She wondered if Prim would let it slip to the interviewers the Capitol would send to her house. She couldn't stop thinking about Prim. She kept telling herself she needed to find Peeta, but Rue's death and being away from her sister seemed to drain the life out of her.

As the day wore on, Katniss told herself it was time to get her head together and begin searching for Peeta, but it was twilight and heading into the woods after dark was too dangerous, so she found a tree and belted herself in. She wondered where the day had gone.

Yesterday...Rue died yesterday, she reminded herself. You wasted the whole day by sulking when you should've been looking for Peeta. She hoped he would forgive her.

As the sky got dark Katniss listened to their nation's anthem and watched the sky. It was void of any images. Just as she was about to say goodnight to Peeta she heard the trumpets sound.

Claudius Templesmith began speaking, "Attention Tributes! Attention! The regulation requiring a single victor has been suspended. From now on two victors may be crowned if they originate from the same district."

Katniss eyes widened at the news and before she knew it she screamed out, "Peeta!"

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Gale walked into his house and found three strangers sitting in the living room with his mother.

Hazelle jumped up and said, "There he is now. Gale these folks are here from the Capitol to interview you about..."

"My cousin," He interrupted his mom. "I heard." Gale gave him mom a quick look then sat down in one of the chairs. "What do you want to know?" Gale tried to keep a smile on his face, but it was hard. He hated these people and what they stood for.

"Let's get a shot of him sitting on the sofa with his mother," the woman in the group said.

Gale and Hazelle followed the trio's instructions and when everything was set, they answered the questions they were asked about Katniss.

Hazelle told them that she was always a precocious girl, full of life and spirit.

Gale said they were not only cousins but best friends as well.

"And what about Peeta Mellark?" The woman asked.

Gale's face instantly flashed to contempt. "What about him?"

"We just love everything Peeta's done for Katniss in the arena," Hazelle quickly took the attention off of her son.

"And you, Gale? How do you feel about Peeta sacrificing himself to bring your cousin back home?"

Gale felt his mother's foot press against his own. "I think Peeta has done exactly what I would've done in the arena to save Katniss' life."

"Any clue they had feelings for one another prior to the Games?"

"No," Gale's answer was short.

"We didn't have a clue Peeta felt that way about Katniss, but we can most certainly understand why. Isn't that right, Gale?" Hazelle looked to her son.

"Yup," Gale said. His mother's foot pressed down against his once again. "I couldn't blame anyone for falling for Katniss. She's a great girl. Loves her family...her friends..." Gale started thinking about all the things he loved about Katniss. "She's not afraid of anything. In fact, I'd say she's the bravest person I know and that's why she's going to win this thing."

"Perfect!" The woman exclaimed. "That was just perfect. Thank you so much." She stood up and turned to the men she had arrived with. "Let's get this stuff and head back." As she walked out she said, "Your interviews will probably start airing first thing in the morning."

"What about Katniss' mom?" Gale asked.

"Hers should be on sometime tonight."

Within two hours the image of Prim was on the television screen and Katniss was moved to the side.

"Prim, it's lovely to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you too," Prim smiled.

"How have you been doing since your sister left?"

"I miss her, but I know she's coming home. She has to." Prim's large eyes seemed to take over her face.

"Do you have a favorite part of the Games so far?"

"I liked it when Katniss blew up the Careers' supplies and when she and Peeta tricked the Careers into thinking that they were following her. I thought it was funny when Katniss lifted up her snare and found a rabbit in it right after Peeta told the Careers there was nothing in it." Prim giggled.

"And what do you think of Peeta?"

"I love him. He's trying to save my sister's life." Prim shrugged and said, "And my sister loves him so he's got to be a wonderful person, because Katniss is not an easy person to please." Her face looked very serious.

"And you Mrs. Everdeen, how do you feel about Peeta and Katniss' burgeoning relationship in the arena?"

The image widened and included Katniss' mother sitting next to Prim. "I appreciate everything that Peeta is doing for Katniss...that he's done, but I think Katniss might be a little too young to have a serious boyfriend." Katniss' mother had a little smile on her face. "Still...if I were to pick a boy for my daughter...I don't think I could've chosen a better one than Peeta Mellark."

Gale could barely stomach the rest of the interview. When it was followed up with Peeta's family Gale wanted to leave the house. Instead he watched and listened to Peeta's mother talk about how brave her son was and how she'd be proud to welcome Katniss into her home anytime. It took everything Gale had not to throw something against the wall when he heard that. He remembered the witch talking about Peeta's cowardice on reaping day. And welcoming Katniss into her home? Hah! Gale knew the woman wouldn't let Katniss into the bakery to buy a loaf of bread let alone into her home.

Gale had barely touched his dinner, but he knew better than to waste food, so he ate it. His family sat around the television and watched as Katniss prepared for bed by belting herself into a tree. This was usually the younger kid's signal that they needed to get dressed for bed too. Once the anthem played, their mother would tuck them in for the night.

Gale's head rested against the back of the sofa as Panem's anthem filled his living room. His brothers and sister were bidding him goodnight and then they heard the trumpets followed by Claudius Templesmith's voice.

"Attention Tributes! Attention! The regulation requiring a single victor has been suspended. From now on two victors may be crowned if they originate from the same district."

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"They're going to kill her," Effie worried aloud. "They're going to kill her now."

"Stop it, Effie!" Portia had been on edge since Katniss had lifted her three middle fingers, kissed them and lifted them to the television cameras. It was the same symbol District 12 gave to Katniss during the reaping. "They are *not* going to kill her."

"Oh yes they are," Effie poured herself a glass of wine.

"That's your fifth glass of wine, Effie." Cinna took the glass out of her hand and set it down. "Why don't you have some juice instead? We don't want you turning into Haymitch." Cinna chuckled and tried to play it off.

Effie had never been lectured on her alcohol intake in her entire life. Cinna's comment should've bothered her, but it didn't. Instead she heeded his warning and poured herself a glass of fruit juice. "Where is he anyway?"

"I don't know," Portia began pacing around the main living area of their suite. "I haven't seen him for a while."

"Why don't I go and see if he's at the party?" Cinna suggested.

"Good idea. Let's all go." Effie stood up to leave the room.

"Effie? When was the last time you slept?" Cinna asked.

"I'm not sure. Last night maybe?" Effie wondered how long it was since she had been in her quarters. "I changed this morning," she began remembering out loud. "But I fell asleep on the sofa."

"It's getting late. Katniss has secured herself in for the night. Why don't you go to bed too?"

"I don't know," Effie remembered the fire. It had started a few hours after Katniss had gone to sleep. "No. I think I'll just stay here."

"You'll be much more comfortable in your quarters, Effie." Portia tried to convince the escort. "In fact, I'll stay here and keep an eye on things while you get some rest."

"No," Effie shook her head. "Thank you, though." She turned and sat on the sofa just as Haymitch made his way into the room. "Where have you been?!" Effie was up and at Haymitch's side in no time. "We've been sitting here worried sick about her and you've been...where? Drinking?!"

"Nope," Haymitch walked to the bar and poured himself some whiskey. "But I am now."

"Of course you are," Effie glared. "You know what's going to happen now, don't you?"

"I have an idea, but..." Haymitch sat on a chair and tried to stay calm.

"But what?!" Effie screamed. "And you still haven't told us where you were this whole time!"

"I was talking to a couple of Gamemakers."

"Gamemakers? What on earth for?" Effie asked.

"Thought I'd see about getting a meeting with Seneca Crane," Haymitch answered.

"Seneca Crane?" The three of them said in unison.

"Yup," Haymitch said. "Plutarch Heavensbee is setting something up for me. Apparently he's been impressed with Katniss since she shot the apple out of the pig's mouth and he fell into the punchbowl. With any luck, I'll be able to talk to Seneca tomorrow morning. Maybe plead for her life." Haymitch sighed.

"Oh." Effie's voice, which had just been shrill, was now compassionate. "Do you think she'll be alive till morning?"

"I don't know. I hope, but..." His eyes met Effie's. "I just don't know."

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Peeta had forced himself up a total of three times the next day in order to get some much needed water. Each time he reached out the stick and grabbed a hold of the moss, he collapsed back down to the ground. Though the movement was painful and exhausting, it seemed to help get his blood flowing a bit. He tried to move his legs, but when he did he screamed, so he no longer attempted moving the lower half of his body.

He forced himself to stay awake during the day, but he had dozed off more often than not. When he heard voices coming at him, he immediately knew it was Cato and Clove.

"You eat them!" Clove screamed.

"No!"

"You shouldn't have killed Three. We could've made him taste these berries to see if they were edible." Clove said with a disgusted tone in her voice.

"Three needed to die! He's the reason our food got blown up!" Cato yelled.

"You think *he* did that?"

"No," Cato's voice was threatening. "I know who did it and she's going to regret it."

"What if it was Thresh?"

"Thresh is in that field. He's not coming out of there." Cato threw something across the ground and it landed at Peeta's head. "Damn it! We should've killed him that first day!"

"We should've killed *Lover Boy* the first day! But you had to find out why the girl on fire got her eleven!"

"So did you, so don't start with me!"

"We should've known he was up to something," Clove sounded aggravated. "And why isn't he dead yet, Cato?"

"I don't know, Clove! I sliced his leg down to the bone!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure! I know where I cut him!" Cato screamed out in frustration. Peeta thought he sounded like a spoiled child. "I'm sick of this! We need food!"

"I don't understand why we haven't gotten anything from our sponsors," Clove was kicking something, but Peeta didn't know what it was.

"You really think we still have sponsors after that crap at the Cornucopia?! Nobody wants to sponsor a couple of tributes that can't keep their own supplies safe." Cato's voice was getting lower. "This is bull. We need some food and I'm not eating these berries. They're probably deadly."

"I don't know, Cato." Clove paused. "Look at this..." Peeta didn't know what they were doing, but he heard some rustling noises. "Looks like somebody's been eating them."

"Then try them."

"Fine!" Clove snapped at him. "I'd rather die from a poisonous berry than starve to death out here with you!" Peeta knew the Careers must've been famished if they were willing to try out an unfamiliar berry in the arena. Then again, he was sure, all the food surrounding the Careers were unfamiliar to them unless they were provided by the Capitol. "I'll eat *one*!"

"Then eat it!"

"Stop it!" Clove yelled. Peeta heard a scuffle behind him and then the sound of Clove choking. "You son of a..." She was making a spitting noise and then said, "I'm not dead."

"Maybe it takes awhile?" Cato paused and said, "You never know. It could sneak up on you in a few minutes or something."

"If they were going to kill me, I'd be dead by now. And thanks for shoving them down my throat!"

"We had to find out somehow," Cato said as though that was his apology. "Should we take some for later? Wait to see how you handle them?"

"I guess and Cato...if you try something like that again, I'm going to shove a knife down *your* throat!"

"No you won't," he laughed. "Not until Thresh and fire girl are dead anyway." Peeta heard them walking away, but he didn't move. He stayed still for over an hour before feeling around him for the item Cato threw.

"Thank you, Cato," Peeta grinned as he lifted a small handful of berries.

He stayed awake until nightfall, with the hopes that Clove would stab Cato after all and Peeta would hear the sound of a cannon. He wondered what happened to the Careers' food and if Katniss had anything to do with the destruction of it. He didn't think she would have the means to blow up their food, so he assumed the Gamemakers had something to do with it. After the anthem played Peeta smiled up at the sky, he was about to say goodnight to Katniss when he heard the sound of the trumpets playing.

"Attention Tributes!" It was Claudius Templesmith. "Attention! The regulation requiring a single victor has been suspended. From now on two victors may be crowned if they originate from the same district."

Peeta's eyes flew open as he called out, "Katniss!"

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"Seneca, nice to see you again." Haymitch held his hand out to the Head Gamemaker.

"Haymitch, I don't have much time..."

"No. Of course not. I'll make this quick."

"What do you want?" Seneca sounded impatient.

Haymitch tried to stay as calm as possible. He knew that Plutarch had already brought up a rule change with the Gamemakers the day before.

Plutarch had told his fellow Gamemakers that the whole Capitol was up in arms about Peeta dying without getting to see Katniss again. And now that Katniss has admitted she had feelings for Peeta, even sponsors were reluctant to provide gifts to other tributes with the fear that it might hinder Katniss' efforts to find Peeta. Once Plutarch brought the conversation up with his fellow Gamemakers, they all pounced on the idea of bringing the pair home. Not to mention District 2 still had a pair of tributes in the Games and perhaps the sponsors would find them to be an exceptional bet once they were assured Cato and Clove would work together and not turn on one another.

"Look...Don't kill her," Haymitch was practically begging. "You'll just make a martyr out of her."

"Seems I already have." Seneca said with an edge to his voice.

"I've been hearing some rumors out of District 11. Now I know you have experience in controlling a crowd, but what if you gave them something to root for instead of fight over?"

"Like what?"

Haymitch took a breath and said, "Young love."

"You really think District 11 will calm down because of some...trivial romance?"

"It's not trivial. Everybody around the Capitol is talking about it. I've even heard that sponsors have been pulling their gifts from some of the other Districts." Haymitch hoped he wasn't giving away too much of Plutarch's information.

"How did you hear that?"

"I've been talking to the sponsors. I've gotten a few that usually favor the better districts like One and Two." Haymitch hadn't been lying. He had spoken to sponsors that normally sponsored the Careers, but only two of them gave something to Haymitch for his tributes. "All I'm saying is that...Peeta's willing to die for Katniss in that arena and Katniss has proved she loves him just as much. That's not the type of love people will overlook." Haymitch knew he had said more than enough. If he pushed too much, Seneca could very well walk away and kill both Katniss and Peeta. "There's a saying that's been around since before the Dark Days, make love not war. Maybe sending out *that* message is the right way to go." Haymitch stuck his hand out and said, "I've taken up enough of your time. Thank you, for meeting with me."

Seneca shook Haymitch's hand and said, "Always a pleasure, Haymitch."

The second Haymitch walked into their suite he was pounced on by Portia. "Well, what happened?"

"I spoke with Seneca and pled my case."

"Do you think Effie's right? Do you think the Gamemakers are going to try and kill Katniss?" Cinna asked.

"Don't know," Haymitch sat on the sofa and put his head back. "Where is Effie?"

"Cinna forced her to go to bed," Portia took up a seat across from Haymitch. "She hadn't slept since Katniss blew up the supplies."

Haymitch blew out a breath and said, "I know how she feels."

"When was the last time you slept, Haymitch?" Portia looked up at Cinna with a furrowed brow.

"Don't know. Can't remember."

"Why don't you close your eyes for a bit?" Cinna suggested. "Portia and I will keep an eye on things."

"Nah," Haymitch rubbed his eyes with his forefinger and thumb. "Wouldn't be able to sleep if I tried."

"If you change your mind," Portia stood up and pulled a footstool out for Haymitch. "Let us know. We're right here."

Within a few minutes Cinna and Portia heard Haymitch's snores coming from the sofa.

"Do you feel like we're the only two actually getting any sleep around here?" Cinna asked.

"Have you slept?" Portia raised her eyebrows to him.

"No," Cinna said on a laugh.

"Me either."

By dinner Cinna and Portia woke up both Effie and Haymitch. They were both upset that the pair had let them spend so many hours asleep, but when Cinna assured them that Katniss had spent the day

hunting, drinking and resting. Effie and Haymitch felt a bit more at ease.

They sat around their suite after spending an hour at the party and waited for signs that the Gamemakers would spare Katniss' life. With each hour that passed they were more concerned that the Gamemakers were going to take out their revenge at night. They watched the interviews of the tribute's families and waited to hear Katniss and Peeta's families speak.

Haymitch breathed out a sigh of relief when he heard Katniss' sister Prim mention their "cousin, Gale."

When Peeta's father spoke, it was from the heart.

"My son is an incredible person. I knew he was going to risk his life for Katniss before he left our district..."

"How did you know that Mr. Mellark?"

"He told me..." the baker choked back some tears. "He told me, Katniss needed to come home to her family and that he loved her."

"Did you try to talk him out of sacrificing himself for Katniss?"

"No," he shook his head.

"Why not? Wouldn't you rather your own son come back from the Games?"

"I'd love for my son to come home from the Games, but..." he cleared his throat and looked down. When he lifted his face his eyes were filled with tears. "If Peeta came home without Katniss, he'd be incomplete. He'd never be able to live with himself, so no. As much as

it pains me to say it...if my son can't come back *with* Katniss, then *she* needs to come home to her family. Just as my boy wanted."

"That was beautiful," Effie sniffled as she wiped her eyes.

The television screen featured the Capitol's symbol as their anthem began playing.

"I think I'm going to head to bed for a few hours," Cinna yawned.

"Me too," Portia stood up to join him.

The sound of the trumpets coming from the television screen caught all of their attention.

"Attention Tributes! Attention! The regulation requiring a single victor has been suspended. From now on two victors may be crowned if they originate from the same district."

The television screen split and showed both Katniss and Peeta's image.

"Katniss!" Peeta called out.

"Peeta!" Katniss screamed from her perch in the tree.

"Wha...What did he just say?" Effie was in shock.

Haymitch jumped up from his spot and slapped his hands together.
"Yes!"

"My goodness, Haymitch. Did you do this?" Portia asked with a look of disbelief on her face.

"Oh no..." He turned to Effie and said, "This was you." He pointed at Effie. "This was all her idea."

"Me?" Effie said on a breath. Her hand had gone to her heart. "*Me?*"

Haymitch let out a laugh as he said, "You were the one that said the Gamemakers make the rules. They can change them."

"Hah!" Cinna called out. "Effie, you're a genius!" He rushed and pulled the escort into an embrace.

"They can *both* win?" Effie was still in shock by the news. "They can both... My God! They can both win!"

74th Hunger Games

Challenge: We

Always Were Chapter

19: Let me Call you

Sweetheart, a hunger

games fanfic |

FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Nineteen: Let Me Call You Sweetheart

I'd like to dedicate this chapter to my beta readers S and A. Thank you for correcting me when I'm wrong, asking the important questions and understanding when I go my own way. Now for one of the moments you've been waiting for. Katniss and Peeta finally meet in the arena!

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

Haymitch, Effie, Cinna and Portia immediately ran to the party after hearing the news of the rule change. Multiple guests were congratulating them and wishing them luck on bringing their tributes home. Haymitch began speaking with several different sponsors; it was time to work on getting some medication for Peeta.

Effie met with a few groups of people as Cinna and Portia did what Haymitch suggested earlier in the evening...eavesdropped. The entire room had been talking about the Star Crossed Lovers from District 12.

Portia, who hadn't slept for what seemed like an eternity, was wide awake. "Cinna, I still can't believe this. Peeta's going to come home."

"Yes he is," Cinna put his arm around Portia's shoulder and gave her a squeeze. "They both are."

"If Haymitch can get his medication," Portia worried.

"Oh, he'll get it. Listen to these people. They're all in love with our pair."

Portia smiled and said, "They are, aren't they?"

Cinna's smile matched Portia's. "Yes they are. Who wouldn't be in love with those kids?"

"Kids..." Portia thought for a second. "Those kids are more adult than most of the men and women I know. Sometimes I forget they're only sixteen."

"I know," Cinna agreed. "Makes you wonder what kind of life they've lived. Why they had to grow up so quickly."

"Mmmm..." Portia leaned her head against Cinna's shoulder. Just then they overheard the mentors from District 2 talking to some prospective sponsors.

"Do you really think the Gamemakers are going to let Lover Boy live? They're just looking for a way to set the girl up. They've already tried to kill her with the fire. Put her in the line of *our* tributes. By getting her to align herself with that boy, she's that much weaker. Prime target for Cato and Clove."

Portia's eyes darted to the group of people talking and then back to Cinna. "You don't think that's what..."

"No," Cinna told her, but Portia could tell that the conversation had him concerned. "There are too many people invested in Katniss and Peeta. The Gamemakers wouldn't pull a stunt like that."

Portia looked at the group of people again and saw the mentors shaking hands with the sponsors. "They pit twenty-four children against each other and make them fight to the death each year. You think they wouldn't set Katniss and Peeta up?"

Their hopes of bring their tributes home had quickly vanished.

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Gale couldn't sleep. He watched the television set and stared at Katniss' image. The moment he heard Katniss scream out Peeta's name after the rule change was announced, he felt like someone had stuck a knife into his chest. He was certain the Gamemakers were setting her up. Throwing another fireball at her, but this one wasn't as obvious. He wanted her to see it. He wanted her to open up her eyes to their deception, but he could tell by her reaction afterwards that she was completely blinded by the Gamemakers' plan.

Katniss called out Peeta's name and collapsed against the tree as if someone let the air out of her. The look on her face was complete and utter shock. Gale watched her grey eyes magnify by the tears that filled them. He watched her as she lifted her face to the sky and smiled. "Peeta, I'm coming. Wait for me. Wait for me." She could barely get her last sentence out as the tears finally spilled onto her cheeks. Instead of hiding behind her sleeping bag, as she did every night, she kept her face in full view. Katniss kept looking at the ground and on several occasions reached for the belt that kept her lashed into the tree and then shook her head as if telling herself, no. When she

did fall asleep Gale was thankful. He hoped she had talked some sense into herself, but in the morning, she was up and on the lookout. Though Gale wanted it to be for food, he knew it was for Peeta.

The moment Gale saw the dried blood under the tracker jacker tree; he knew Peeta's injury wasn't as minor as he had wanted it to be. He chastised himself for making light of it. My God, he thought to himself, what is wrong with you? You're wishing for Peeta to be dead...making everything he did to help Katniss out in the arena seem like it was nothing at all. Gale felt his stomach clenching. It was as though someone had taken a hold of his gut and was twisting it. Yes, he loved Katniss, but to relish in the death of another human being...a decent one at that, made him ashamed of himself. It was as though a light went off in his head. He was no better than the people at the Capitol who lived for the Hunger Games each year.

Hazelle walked down the stairs and into the living room to see her son with his hands covering his head. "Gale? Are you all right?"

Gale stood up and ran to his mother's arms. "What's wrong with me, mom?"

She held her son and rubbed his back, "Shhh...shhhh."

"Peeta's a good guy, right? He's a good guy and I..." Gale couldn't voice what he was thinking.

"What?" Hazelle urged him.

"Mom, I've been..." Gale pulled himself away from his mother and walked away from her, hiding his face in shame. "I thought I was a better person than this."

"You're a great person."

"No I'm not."

"Yes you are," Hazelle said sternly.

"If you knew what I'd been wishing for, you wouldn't think very highly of me."

"Let me guess. You've been hoping Peeta would die," Hazelle said.

Gale turned around and looked at his mother. "How did you know?"

"We've all been thinking it, Gale. It's the only way Katniss could come home." Hazelle shrugged her shoulders and walked into the kitchen as though wishing Peeta dead were natural. "Up until last night, there's never been a possibility of two victors."

"Yeah, but after they announced the rule, did you still want him dead?"

"Of course not." Hazelle stepped out of the kitchen and looked at Gale with hesitation in her eyes. "Did you?" The shame on Gale's face answered her question. "Well, jealousy will do that to a person." She went back into the kitchen and began making breakfast. "Important thing is that you realized you were wrong."

Gale walked into the kitchen and sat at the table. "But I'm still jealous. I mean, I don't want him dead or anything, but...I hate him, mom."

"Of course you do. He's in love with Katniss and she's in love with him."

"Why do you keep saying that?" Gale turned his head in frustration. "You have no clue if she is or isn't. This could just be an act their mentor came up with or something."

"No...you're right. I don't know for certain."

"She's trying to find him, you know?" Gale's head dropped down.

"I'm sure she is," Hazelle kept her opinion to herself.

"I guess we'll see what happens when and if they finally do get together in the arena."

"Yup...we'll see."

The sound of Gale's sister Posy ended their conversation. "Hey, Katniss found Peeta!"

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The urge to jump out of the tree and search for Peeta was overwhelming. Katniss had to fight it with every ounce of her being. She was certain the night would never end. Eventually sleep took over, but the moment she heard the sound of an early morning bird calling, her eyes were open and her senses were on full alert. She stepped onto the ground fully aware she had to be extra cautious. The Careers could very well be waiting for her to find Peeta before launching their attack.

Katniss tried to think of the things Rue had said, where Peeta's trail had gone. She went to the tracker jacker tree and saw the dried blood and followed the trail of it towards the river. She, like Rue, lost it. She walked further down the riverbank and thought, I was just here a few days ago and I didn't see him, but she ventured further down. That's when she saw the rock with a splattering of dried blood on it. It was old, but something told her it was Peeta's. She went a few more feet and saw the bushes that Rue picked the berries from. If Rue had been

next to Peeta, surely she would've said something. Katniss was certain of it.

"What took you so long, sweetheart?"

Katniss' head snapped around. The sound was coming from the side with her bad ear, but it had to be Peeta. No one else would call her sweetheart in the arena. "Peeta?" Her heart was racing. "Peeta?" Her eyes peeled the surrounding forest and still there was no sign of him. She stepped closer to the river in hopes that he was hiding in the large tree.

"Well don't step on me."

"Peeta?" Katniss looked down and saw Peeta smiling up at her. A flash of white in an otherwise dark terrain.

Peeta opened his eyes and took in Katniss' image. He had just been thinking about her. Wishing he could see her one last time. "Hi there." He wanted to reach out and grab her. Take her in his arms and kiss her, but the mud had dried around his limbs and he could barely move.

Katniss dropped down to her knees. With a flabbergasted look on her face she said, "Close your eyes again." Peeta obliged. Katniss laughed and said, "You should've done this for the Gamemakers. *You* would've gotten the eleven." Her face change to one of love the moment he opened his eyes and looked at her. He had been covered in mud. Disguised as part of the landscape, but all Katniss could see was the sweet blue eyed boy she fell in love with.

"Yes. Forget camouflage. Cake decorating...the final defense of the dying," Peeta smiled softly at Katniss.

A flash of panic rushed through her, which swiftly turned to resolve.
"You are not dying."

"Says who?"

"Says me," Katniss reached out and touched his face. A few of the rocks Peeta had adhered to his skin fell off. She instantly began brushing them off of him. "Close your eyes for me. Let me get these off of you."

Peeta didn't close his eyes. He spoke to her instead. "I hear we're on the same team now."

Katniss stopped what she was doing and said, "We always were, Peeta."

"Come down here for a second," Peeta said softly to her. His heart was threatening to burst with emotion. Katniss put her good ear up to his lips and he whispered to her, "I dare you to kiss me while my face is covered in mud."

Katniss pulled back and laughed. "I don't think so, but I'd be happy to once I get you cleaned up. Now close your eyes and let me get this rubble off of your face." She gently worked the stones off of his skin. Once it was clear she ran her hands down his arms and freed them from the dried earth. She took hold of him and tried to lift him up, but the pain caused him to cry out. "Okay," She stopped what she was doing. "Okay..." She tried to hide her fear. "We have to get you out of this." She brushed her thumbs across his tear streaked face causing the dried dirt to smear across his cheeks. Her head tilted to the side as she swallowed back her own tears. "Um..." She looked at the river, it was downhill, and she came to a conclusion. "I'm going to roll you. It's shallow over here, okay?"

"Excellent," Peeta's breathing was ragged.

"On three." Katniss loosened up the dirt around the lower half of his body and placed her hands on the sides of him for leverage. She took a deep breath and said, "One. Two. Three!" She grit her teeth and pushed as hard as she could. She heard the sucking sound his body made when it was released from the mud, but the noise that came from Peeta's throat ripped through her. She managed one complete roll, but there was no way she could put him through any more than that. "That's it. You're out."

"No more rolling?" Peeta's throat was dry and cracked.

Katniss was shaking her head. "No. Let's get you cleaned up." She stood up and turned away from him telling herself to get a grip. She took a few deep breaths, shook off her own personal turmoil and got down to business. "Do me a favor," her voice which had been shaking just a moment ago, was now calm and steady. "Keep an eye on the woods for me, okay?"

Peeta looked at her and admired her tenacity. "You got it."

Katniss crouched down and said, "Here. I want you to drink some water." She lifted his head up and gave him a few sips of water from the canteen she had.

When she pulled the bottle away from his lips he let out an "ah" sound. "That's nice. It's been awhile since I've actually *drank* water."

"What have you been doing?" Katniss had no clue how he could stay alive so long without it.

"I've been sucking anything moist I could get my hands on up until yesterday. I kind of ran out of stuff then."

She lifted his head and made him drink some more. "Well, you don't have to worry about that anymore. You'll have plenty of food and water from now on. I'll make sure of it." When he drank, what Katniss guessed to be about a cup of water, she said, "Is that enough?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Don't want to give you too much at once," she began taking the water bottles and pouring them over his head, face and upper body to rid him of the dirt and mud. "We've got to take it slow or you'll get sick."

Peeta turned his head towards the woods and kept a lookout, but his eyes kept flashing back to Katniss. He couldn't believe she was there with him. He was certain he was going to die without seeing her again. Shortly after hearing the rule change he wondered if Haymitch would break their deal and send him in some medication after all. Peeta had thought about it for a little while and decided that if Haymitch had sent something to him, he would use it, but nothing came. As the night wore on, he could feel himself dwindling. He had resigned himself to dying without ever seeing Katniss again and now she was pouring water over him...running her hands down his arms and wiping the filth off of him. She had that determined look in her eyes, the one that said nothing was going to stop her...nothing would stand in her way. Peeta loved it when she got that way. It's what he called her fierce side.

Peeta instinctively reached out and grabbed Katniss' hand as she finished her task. "Are you okay?" She asked.

"Yeah," he smiled at her. "I just needed to touch you." He saw her eyes soften for a moment then turn back to that fiery side again. "Just for a second."

"Your second is up. Let me finish getting you cleaned up and then you can hold my hand as much as you want." Katniss was certain if she let Peeta touch her, the wall she had put up would come tumbling down. It took every ounce of strength she had to stay on task. "Besides, you're supposed to be keeping a lookout."

"I know. It's just hard to do that when you're around," Peeta smiled. "You're kind of distracting."

"Well, stop it. Those Careers can pop out of those bushes any minute. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

"No," Peeta grumbled. He knew she was right, but oh, how he wished he could just sit and stare at her.

Katniss peeled off his jacket and shirt then took it to the edge of the river and washed it out, while Peeta watched the woods. When she came back she looked down at his undershirt and said, "Stay still. I have to cut this off of you." He felt the cold blade of her knife cutting at it. Bottle after bottle of icy water was poured over the shirt until it was finally loose enough for her to get it off of him, but when she ran her hands over his skin he couldn't help but suck in a breath. He hadn't realized how badly his body hurt until he felt her touch him. "I'm sorry. I know this hurts, but I have to get it off."

"It's okay."

"Put your arms around my neck," Katniss instructed him.

"I knew you couldn't resist me with my shirt off," Peeta joked.

Katniss smiled at him. "I'm going to prop you up against this rock." It took a few minutes, and some grunting from Peeta, but Katniss got him moved. Once again she doused him with water. When his torso

was free of dirt she addressed his injuries one by one. "Let's take care of these stings." She dug the stingers out of his flesh as she chewed on the leaves that would draw out the venom and relieve the pain. "Sorry about these," she pulled out the stinger from below his ear and heard him wince.

"You should be," he teased. "I told you not to mess around with any hives in the arena." He gasped as she ripped out the stinger from his chest and sighed as she placed the leaves against the wounds. "I'm surprised they didn't kill me or something."

"Probably the mud," Katniss dug out her burn ointment from the backpack.

"The mud?"

"Yeah. Mud sucks out regular bee sting venom, so maybe it helped with the tracker jackers too," she shrugged. "I'm not sure." Her fingers deftly applied the lotion to the long burn he had across his flesh. Katniss took in the rest of his wounds. His body was covered in bruises. He had scratches all over him and he looked pale. His chest, which had been muscular and defined just a few weeks ago, was now soft and tenuous.

Peeta looked at the canister in Katniss' hand and asked, "What's that?"

"Burn medicine." Katniss wondered if Peeta had gotten anything in the way of gifts from Haymitch. He certainly hadn't gotten anything for his leg wound. Peeta just nodded and gave her a little grin. "Has he sent you anything?"

"Nope." Katniss looked as though she were filled with guilt, so Peeta said, "To be fair, I didn't need anything...till now that is. I'd be happy to

get something now though." It was Peeta's way of letting Haymitch know, as long as Peeta and Katniss could win as a team, he'd be happy to accept sponsor gifts. He just hoped Haymitch understood his message. "That feels much better," Peeta sighed as Katniss applied the burn ointment to his chest.

"Yeah?" Katniss couldn't help but feel relieved.

"Yeah." His eyes met hers. "Thanks."

"It's the least I could do considering I was probably the reason you got most of these."

Peeta looked down at his chest and said, "Not all of them."

Katniss looked at the burn scar Peeta was staring at and ran her fingers over the two inch mark. She remembered the day he had shown her the burn he had gotten, no doubt, from his mother. "No, not all of them."

Peeta placed his hand over hers and held it against his chest. "None of these are your fault, you know?"

Katniss found that hard to believe considering she was the reason he had joined the Careers. The reason the Gamemakers started the fire and most definitely the cause of the tracker jacker stings, but she wasn't about to argue with him in his condition. "If you say so."

"I say so."

She could feel his heart beating underneath her hand. She missed it. She missed him. Katniss wanted nothing more than to throw her arms around him, kiss him and tell him that she loved him, but they were in a vulnerable position sitting out in the open and he was burning up.

This last thought brought her to her senses. "Peeta, you've got a fever!"

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Effie watched Haymitch's face as he looked at the control panel in front of him. Haymitch's eyes flashed to hers and she saw deep seeded anger. Effie raised her eyebrows as if asking Haymitch, 'medication?' He gave his head one sharp shake and Effie turned her head away, hiding the repellant feeling she had inside.

They left the control room that allowed Haymitch to send out sponsor gifts and briskly walked down the hall, not saying a word until reaching their suite. Once inside Haymitch let loose by picking up the first piece of furniture he came across and threw it. "Those bastards!"

"Wasn't it available?" Effie didn't understand why they couldn't get the medicine for Peeta. They had more than enough sponsors.

"Oh it was available all right," Haymitch said as he walked to the bar. "Want something?" He poured himself a glass of whiskey and her a glass of wine without waiting for her to reply.

"Then what's the problem?" She walked to the bar and took the glass of wine from him.

"It's out of our price range, Effie." Haymitch lifted his glass as if to say cheers and drank his drink.

"Out of our price range?" Effie shook her head in disbelief. "We have more money than...than... We have twice as much as Finnick Odair's trident cost. How can we not have enough money?"

"Because the price of Peeta's medicine has gone up." Haymitch said with a smirk.

"From last night?" Her eyes opened wide. "Then we'll go out and get more sponsors!"

"Won't work." Haymitch downed another drink.

"So you're giving up?!" Effie slammed her glass down on the bar. "I'm sick of this attitude! I've been dealing with your pessimistic, drunk, cynical...irresponsible mentoring for over ten years and I'm sick of it! Get your...*sweet ass* out there and find the money!"

"My sweet ass?" Haymitch stared at her.

"You heard me!" Effie puffed out her chest at him.

Haymitch blew a breath out of his nose and said, "It wouldn't matter if I signed up every sponsor out there and multiplied it by a hundred. Peeta's medication has increased by five thousand percent."

Effie's eyes grew huge. "Five thousand..."

"Percent!" Haymitch finished for her.

"I've never heard of such an increase. Of course I...I can see the price going up over the span of a few weeks...days even, but hours?"

"Hours," Haymitch squeezed his glass then slammed it down on the bar. "They did this on purpose. They wanted to kill her all along."

"No," Effie bristled at his comment. "I refuse to believe that."

"Oh, wake up, Effie! You really think they'd let the two of them win this thing and *not* let us send him the medicine?"

"These are the Games." Effie began pacing. "Those Gamemakers are always looking for a way to liven things up. How do you know they're not doing that again?"

"They are, Effie! They're setting up Katniss and Peeta for the Careers!" Haymitch started walking around the room, holding his drink up in the air. "Oh, oh...let the two lovebirds get together in the arena. Let them give the Capitol audience what they want and once they let their guard down...BOOM! The Careers come along and kill them! That'll liven things up all right!"

"I refuse to believe that! I refuse to believe the people from the Capitol..."

"That's because you're one of them!"

She pointed her finger at him. "You take that back!" Effie found herself insulted by his comment.

"Oh what's wrong Effie? Don't like being grouped in with the rest of them anymore? Well too bad! That's who you are and that's who you'll always be," Haymitch got in her face.

Cinna and Portia walked into the room just in time to see Effie smacking Haymitch right across the face. "You are a disgusting pig!" Effie spat out at him. "If you had any decency, you'd be at that party trying to find the money for Peeta's medication no matter how much it cost!" She turned to storm away and then turned back to him and said, "And don't you *ever* call me one of *them* again...SWEETHEART!"

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He saw Katniss kneeling at Peeta's side. She was brushing off the dirt from Peeta's face and looking down at him. In all the years that Gale had known Katniss he had only seen this look on her face twice before and both of those times she was looking at Peeta Mellark.

"Come down here for a second," Peeta said to Katniss. Gale couldn't make out what he had whispered in her ear, but when she pulled back and laughed he knew it was genuine.

It took a lot to get Katniss to laugh. Heck, it took Gale almost a year to see her crack a smile, but Peeta seemed to get her to do both so easily.

Gale watched as Katniss ran her hands across Peeta's face, brushing the stones and dirt off of his skin. If he didn't know any better he would swear it was someone else he was watching on television and not Katniss. Her eyes were glowing and the corners of her mouth were lifted in a gentle smile. When she ran her hands down his arms to free them from the dirt and the mud, she looked worried and when she tried to lift Peeta up, he could see her fighting back tears.

"We have to get you out of this." Gale didn't recognize Katniss' voice when she spoke. It was so tender. And when she wiped away Peeta's tears, Gale felt his own reserves threatening to give. "I'm going to roll you. It's shallow over here, okay?"

"Excellent."

"On three. One. Two. Three!" Gale gritted his teeth when he heard Peeta's guttural cries. How could he have thought Peeta's injuries were minor? Gale had seen Peeta's blood soaked pant leg when he was running through the woods after the tracker jacker attack. Gale knew he had been in a battle with the boy from District 4 and suffered some injuries. That Peeta had raced out of the burning forest shortly

before running from the tracker jackers. Gale could barely look at the television screen without being overcome with feelings of remorse.

"That's it. You're out." Katniss told Peeta.

"No more rolling?"

"No. Let's get you cleaned up." Katniss turned away from Peeta for a few seconds then turned back to him with a look of concentration on her face. "Do me a favor...keep an eye on the woods for me, okay?"

"You got it."

"First, I want you to drink some water."

"That's nice. It's been awhile since I've actually *drank* water."

"What have you been doing?" Sucking on moss, Gale thought. Pretty smart considering the guy was barely alive.

"I've been sucking anything moist I could get my hands on up until yesterday. I kind of ran out of stuff then."

"Well, you don't have to worry about that anymore. You'll have plenty of food and water from now on. I'll make sure of it. Is that enough?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Don't want to give you too much at once. We've got to take it slow or you'll get sick." Too late for that, thought Gale. The berries Peeta had eaten the day before came back up on him shortly after Peeta had eaten them. At the time, Gale thought, you haven't eaten for days, you should've known better, but now Gale couldn't help but to feel bad for the guy.

Gale watched as Katniss washed Peeta down and stripped him of his clothes. When Peeta grabbed her hands and claimed he had to touch her, Gale ached inside. He felt himself being torn apart. On one hand he wanted to despise Peeta for being with Katniss, for touching her. For making her laugh and getting her to smile so easily. On the other hand he couldn't help but to feel sorry for Peeta's suffering. No one deserved to go through what he was going through in the arena. Especially since he was so selfless about it. From the moment Gale went into the Justice Building he was prepared to beg Peeta to spare Katniss' life, but Gale didn't have to bother to ask. Peeta had planned on saving Katniss the whole time. Gale's eyes watched Katniss' fingers as they traveled along Peeta's bare chest. They were lingering on an old scar. Gale tried to separate his personal feelings from the situation. He tried to take his love for Katniss out of the equation and ask himself, if he were watching this as Katniss' friend would he believe she had feelings for Peeta? He watched her as Peeta's hand covered her own. Looked at her face as she smiled at Peeta and felt his heart break when her eyes panicked because Peeta was burning up with a fever.

Katniss made Peeta take something to bring his temperature down and gave him something to eat, but Peeta turned his nose up at it. Gale wanted to force feed Peeta. Make him get well so Katniss wouldn't have to watch him suffer. When Katniss finally tempted Peeta into eating, Gale felt relief.

"I'm so tired, Katniss." Peeta told her.

"I know," she reached out and stroked Peeta's cheek. "You can rest as soon as I check your leg, okay?"

Gale held his breath when Katniss began to remove the clothing off the lower half of Peeta's body. Gale knew what she'd find there, but

Katniss had no idea what would be waiting for her. Correction, Gale thought he knew how bad Peeta's wound was, but the extent of his injury was beyond Gale's belief. He turned his head away from the television screen for fear that he might throw up. Gale thought of Peeta's father. He wondered how the man was holding up, seeing his son in this condition.

"What was it?" Gale heard Katniss ask.

"A sword. It's bad, huh?"

"It's going to be fine." Gale could tell Katniss was putting on a brave front.

Gale turned to his mother who was sitting on the chair across from him and said, "She always was a horrible liar." With that, Gale knew beyond a shadow of a doubt what he had been denying...what his mother had been trying to tell him since the start of the Games. Katniss was just as much in love with Peeta as he was with her.

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Katniss turned and reached for the fever pills in the first aid kit. "Here," she dropped a couple of pills in Peeta's hand. "Take these," and handed him some water to drink it down. She pulled out the groosling she had shot the day before and said, "I want you to eat this."

Peeta crinkled up his nose and said, "Nuh uh."

"You have to eat." Katniss was not in the mood to argue.

"Last time I tried that, it came back up."

"When was that?"

"Yesterday. Cato dropped some berries by..."

"Cato?!"

"Don't worry. He didn't see me. It was kind of funny actually. The Careers were fighting over whether or not the berries were safe to eat just a few feet away from me." Peeta grinned.

"And they didn't see you? Of course they didn't see you. I practically stepped on you," Katniss forced herself to chuckle and grabbed some dried fruit from the bag. "Try and eat this, okay?" She felt her nerves wearing thin. Peeta had not only been lying in the mud since the tracker jacker attack, but several people Rue and the Careers had practically been on top of him. If Katniss had walked to the berry bushes with Rue, she would've found Peeta days earlier. She couldn't help but blame herself for his ailments.

"I can't eat, Katniss."

"Yes you can. You have to." Katniss slapped a dried apple into the palm of his hand.

"Well you don't have to get all mad about it."

Katniss cupped Peeta's cheek and said, "I'm not mad." She was furious. Furious with herself for not finding him sooner, but she didn't want to take it out on Peeta. "I just need you to eat. We need you to build your strength back up and the only way you can do that is by eating." She pinched a piece of the fruit off and placed it on his tongue. "So eat...for me."

Peeta could tell Katniss was having a hard time dealing with his injuries. She was upset. He would be too if he came upon her in his condition. He tried to eat a few bites of the dried apple to appease her, but he could barely stomach it. "I'm so tired, Katniss."

"I know," he closed his eyes as her hand trailed down his face. "You can rest as soon as I check your leg, okay?"

Katniss stripped Peeta of his boots and socks then tried to remove his pants, but the moment she tried to pull them off of him she felt his whole body stiffen. "I'm sorry, Peeta." Katniss grit her teeth and gently slid his pants down his legs without looking at his thigh. She wasn't ready to face it. She walked to the edge of the river and placed his pants against some rocks. It would take all of her strength to face this and she knew it. She had to disconnect her emotions.

For the first time since she entered the Games she wished that Prim were there with Peeta. Prim was a born healer. Katniss was a born hunter. Prim, she thought to herself, what do I do? Katniss could hear her sister's voice clear as day, *"You stop thinking about yourself and start thinking about Peeta and what you can do to help him."* Do this, Katniss told herself. Peeta needs you.

She walked up to him and knelt down to look at his wound, but the lower half of his body was encrusted with dirt. After rinsing him down and looking at the cut she said, "What was it?" Katniss knew Cato's sword had caused the damage, but she didn't want to cry and that was the first thing that popped out of her mouth.

"A sword. It's bad, huh?"

"It's going to be fine," she lied. "Just fine." His thigh was swollen; loaded with pus and the cut went clear down to his bone. "I've just got to...clean it." With what she wasn't sure yet. She thought of the leaves

that drew out the poisonous venom and opted for those. She grabbed a handful of them and noticed that Peeta wasn't eating. "You need to finish that apple, Peeta." She put the leaves in her mouth and began to chew.

Peeta watched her as she went through the process of cleaning his wound. Chewing the leaves, placing them along the edges of his open skin. He noticed her shiver at the first sign of infection running out of his leg. He had no clue how she was getting through it, but he could see her willpower slowly waning. By the third application of leaves Katniss looked sick to her stomach. Peeta tried to take her mind off of what she was doing. "Katniss?" She wasn't answering. "Hey?"

"Hmmm," Peeta could barely hear her.

"Katniss, look at me." He reached his hand out and touched her face.

"I'm busy, Peeta," she snapped.

Peeta dropped his hand and said, "Boy, you're really mad at me, aren't you?"

Katniss' face shot around to his and she said, "No! No, I told you. I'm not mad." She was sick to her stomach from all of the slime that was pouring out of his leg. Blaming herself for not searching for Peeta the day before. For wandering around the woods and mourning instead of looking for him. She was pissed as hell that he had joined the Careers in order to save her life and trying to understand why Haymitch hadn't sent something...anything to help Peeta. Surely their romance was the cause of the rule change. Why else would they crown two victors? Peeta's declaration of love during his interview and his actions inside of the arena must have the entire Capitol going crazy, she thought to herself. So where were their sponsors? How could she be upset with Peeta after all that he'd done for her? "I'm not mad at you at all."

She poured some water over her hands to rinse them clean as Peeta said, "Could've fooled me."

Katniss jumped up from her kneeling position and crouched next to Peeta. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him into her embrace. She felt his arms encircle her back and everything she had been fighting to avoid. All of the feelings she had been struggling to overcome bubbled deep within her core. "I'm mad at Cato. Not you." Yes, she was angry with Cato for doing this to Peeta, but that wasn't why she snapped at him. Katniss always had a problem dealing with any form of anger and facing her own faults was not something she handled well. Lashing out had always been the easiest thing to do. She brushed her lips against Peeta's ear and tried to control her trembling voice. Her arms clasped him tighter. "I'm furious with Cato...with the Careers. That's it. I'm not upset with you at all." Her lips were lingering against his cheek. She could feel the heat of his fever radiating off of his skin.

They rubbed their cheeks together in a gentle caress. Peeta's fingers trailed up Katniss' spine as hers brushed through his hair.

"You must be pretty angry. You're shaking." Peeta saw through Katniss clear as day.

"I am." She pulled her face back until their noses were touching. "I could kill him. I'm *going* to kill him," she corrected herself.

Peeta licked his lips and whispered. "It's not your fault." He felt the catch in Katniss' chest. "Understand me? None of this is your fault." He cradled her cheeks and pulled her face away from his until she was looking directly into his eyes. "I chose to join the Careers. I chose to fight Cato. Everything I did out here was because I wanted to do it. It was all my doing. *Mine*. Not yours. So quit beating yourself up about it."

"I'm not," Katniss began chewing on her bottom lip. It amazed her the way Peeta saw right through her.

"Liar," Peeta whispered. He grinned at her and said, "We both knew what I was going to do when we came into the Games, right?" Katniss nodded her head. "Then stop taking all the credit for my hard work." Katniss let out a little burst of laughter and ended it with a soft smile. "That's better." Peeta stroked her hair and said, "So...what's a guy got to do to get a kiss around here?"

Katniss leaned in and placed her lips a breath away from his and whispered, "Eat."

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It was hard to pull his eyes away from the screen. Gale seemed to be mesmerized by Katniss' every move. He wanted to hate her. The amount of pain she caused him seemed almost unforgivable. He wanted to forget Katniss ever existed, but she had been such a huge part of his life for so long that trying to go on without her would be like trying to survive without his right arm. He began imagining that it was her she was looking at with her eyes so full of love and not Peeta. That it was Gale's face she was touching, but he had never known the feeling of Katniss' hands against his skin. He had no intimate knowledge of her. The closest they had ever gotten was on reaping day when she hugged him and told him to make sure her family didn't starve. Watching Peeta and Katniss together was like putting himself through a form of personal torture. His mother had asked him to help her with the laundry several times, but Gale couldn't move from his spot in front of the television set. He was past anger. How could he be mad at his Catnip? But she wasn't *his* anymore. She never was. Part of him felt empty. Like someone had scooped out his heart and then

he'd see Peeta say something to Katniss. Tell her something as if he was reading her mind, and Gale was reminded that his heart, was in fact, still there and it was currently being stomped on. He was waiting for the tears to come, but they never did. Maybe he was still in shock. Maybe he was still hanging onto the glimmer of hope that this was all an act. But the longer he saw the two of them together, the more he knew there was no way they were faking it. How long, he wondered. How long had this been going on?

"Mom?"

Hazelle stopped what she was doing and went to her son. "What is it, dear?"

"Why did you think there was something going on between them before the Games?" Gale was watching Katniss as she helped Peeta into a cave.

Hazelle sat on the edge of the sofa and told Gale about Katniss bringing by a small loaf of bread for Posy's birthday and saying it was from a friend.

"So you think Peeta was the friend?" Katniss laid out her sleeping bag and was trying to get Peeta to lay down in it.

"After you mentioned Peeta's feelings for her...I had my suspicions."

Gale couldn't seem to hear what Katniss and Peeta were saying to each other, but he noticed her brushing Peeta's hair out of his eyes. "Since Posy's birthday? That was months ago."

Hazelle put her hand on Gale's back and began to rub. "I know."

Gale watched the pair on the screen. Peeta was talking about dying and Katniss looked like she wanted to. "She's in love with him, mom."

"I know," Hazelle said softly.

"She never told me. That whole time she kept it from me." Gale pulled his head away from the television screen and asked his mom, "Why didn't she trust me?"

"Maybe it had nothing to do with trust."

"Then why? Why wouldn't she tell me about him?"

Hazelle sighed and said, "Gale, I wish I could answer that for you. I really do, but the only person that can answer that is Katniss." She pat her son's hand and said, "You've been speculating about her and Peeta since the day they left and what good has it done you? None. If you want my advice, wait for her to get home and ask her yourself. Better yet...give her the benefit of the doubt and wait for her to tell you."

"You think she actually will?"

"I do."

"You think Peeta might have had something to do with keeping it a secret?" Gale wondered aloud.

"I think you're putting ideas in your head...creating scenarios that make Peeta out to be the bad guy."

Gale started shaking his head, no then stopped. "He's not a bad guy though, is he?"

"I can't tell you that. You've got to make up your own mind about him."

"What do you think about him?" Gale asked her.

"I think it took a lot of courage to do what he did, not only in the arena, but during the interview too."

"What was so courageous about his interview?"

Hazelle smiled and said, "Would you want to face Katniss after saying those things about her on national television?"

Gale let out a burst of laughter and said, "No." He noticed his mother's face change when she glanced at the television set. Gale turned his face to it and saw what she had been staring at.

Katniss was sitting over a sleeping Peeta and stroking his head. She leaned in and placed a kiss against his forehead then one against his lips. Peeta startled and took a second before saying, "Finally."

Gale stood up from his seat and walked into the kitchen and began folding some of the laundry his mother took in to earn money. His back was to the television set. His eyes were focused on a dingy grey shirt that had been worn way past its prime. The first wave of resentment came as a shock to his system. It wasn't Peeta that Gale felt such disdain towards, but Katniss. He wondered how he could still have feelings of love for her and be infuriated with her at the same time. He had loved Katniss for a while now and watching her kiss Peeta was harder than watching her fight for her life.

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The District 12 suite was dark with the exception of the glow from the television set. Effie sat on the edge of her perch sipping a cup of tea

laced with brandy. Her eyes were focused on Katniss and Peeta. She was sure the whole country was focused on them.

"Hey," Haymitch walked into the suite and took a seat on the opposite end of the sofa.

"Katniss hasn't noticed the parachute yet." Effie told him. "She's trying to conceal the opening of the cave."

"Give her a minute. She'll see it."

"With any luck the broth will settle Peeta's stomach." Effie sipped her tea.

"Yup," Haymitch watched Katniss as she ran to the parachute.

The look on Katniss' face when she opened up the package caused both Haymitch and Effie to look away from the television set.

Effie shook her head. "This isn't right."

"I know it isn't, but there's nothing we can do about it," Haymitch agreed.

Effie stood up to refill her cup of tea. "Would you like some tea?"

"No, but I could use a drink."

"Me too," she said. "I've added a little brandy."

Haymitch let out a snort and said, "I'll just stick with a shot of whiskey."

"As you like." Effie prepared their beverages and sat back down. She pursed her lips and pushed a button on the remote control to turn the volume up on the television set. "Haymitch?" She said quietly.

"Yeah?" Their voices were practically drowned out by the sounds Katniss and Peeta were making in the background.

"You play chess, don't you?"

Haymitch had no clue why they were being so quiet about his hobbies. "Yeah."

"What kind of player are you?" Effie turned her body to his. "Do you move your pieces around the board and hope for the best or do you look over your competition and imagine the possible outcomes?"

Haymitch thought for a second and said, "The only way to win is if you're ahead of the competition. Guess I...I try to think a few moves ahead." He turned to face her and said, "Why?"

"You were right when you said I was one of...of them."

"Look Effie I was mad..."

Effie put her hand out to stop him. "Hear me out for a minute." She paused and then continued. "You come to the Capitol once a year for the Games. Your job starts and stops with your tributes. Mine on the other hand is year round. I'm surrounded by sponsors all year long...by Gamemakers. I work with these people. I know how they think." She picked up her cup and took a sip of tea then set it on the coffee table. "After your comments to me, I'll admit, I was angry. I knew you meant them as an insult." Before Haymitch could say anything, Effie put her hand up as if to silence him. "And then I began to think, what if he's right? I started to imagine what I would do if I were a Gamemaker. Would I change the rules and hope for the best or would I be thinking a few moves ahead?"

"Like in chess." Haymitch was starting to get Effie's drift.

"Precisely." Effie lowered her voice down to barely above a whisper. "Was there anything else that went up so drastically in price other than Peeta's medication?"

Haymitch thought for a second and said, "Yeah...arrows."

Effie had a gleam in her eyes. "Peeta needs medication to win the Games. Katniss needs arrows to win the Games. I wonder if any other tributes have needs that can't be met?"

"You're thinking they're intentionally keeping things from all the tributes and not just Katniss and Peeta?"

Effie shrugged her shoulders. "There's only one way to find out."

"I have no way of checking on the other tribute's items, Effie."

"You don't have to. You seem to have a good relationship with their mentors. They can check."

"What about the Careers? There's no way those mentors are going to let on..."

Effie smiled and said, "That's where I come in." She patted Haymitch's leg. "If there's one thing we Capitol folks love to do it's gossip. And I *am* one of their own."

"But why? Why would the Gamemakers keep things from *all* of them?"

"Am I supposed to come up with all the answers?" Effie's eyes got serious. "But if I'm right...you can bet your buttons they're going to be throwing another wrench into these Games."

Haymitch sat back and thought about Effie's theory. It was plausible. He began nodding his head. He turned to her and said, "Have you always been this...crafty?"

"As a matter of fact I have." She stood up and straightened out the hem of her skirt and jacket. Effie whispered, "What do you say we go snooping around?"

Haymitch stood next to her and said, "You know Effie...you're not that hard to tolerate with a few brandies in you."

Effie straightened out his tie and said, "You're not that hard to stomach with a few less bottles of whiskey in you either."

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The stark contrast of the white bandage wrapped around Peeta's leg, to his underpants, left Katniss knowing she had to wash them. "We're going to have to get the rest of your clothes off of you so I can rinse them out." Since he was only wearing one item, there was no need to tell him what it was he had to take off.

Peeta could see her hesitation so he said, "Got something in that bag I can cover myself with?" Though most people could care less when it came to nudity in the arena, Peeta knew Katniss and how she would feel about crossing such boundaries. Especially in front of live viewers.

"Yes," Katniss' shoulders relaxed when she heard his question. She pulled out Rue's backpack, handed it to him and turned around. When she saw the last of his clothing fly over her head and splash into the water she asked, "All covered?"

"Turn around and see for yourself," Peeta joked.

Katniss could hear the humor in his voice. She glanced over her shoulder and laughed at the sight of him. He was naked, but for a small backpack covering his private parts. "I almost wish I had your gift for art. I'd definitely paint this picture."

Peeta could no longer keep his eyes open. He leaned back against the rock and drifted to sleep. Before he knew it Katniss was waking him up. Urging him to get dressed. Though it took some doing, they finally got his clothes on and Peeta up on his feet, but the moment he put weight on his leg he was sure he was going to pass out. "I don't think I can do this."

"Yes you can. You can do it." Katniss urged him. "Come on." She hated putting him through so much pain. The life seemed to drain right out of him. She could hear his breathing getting ragged the further they walked so she stopped. "Sit down." She propped him up on the edge of the bank and put his head between his legs. She ran her hands gingerly up and down his spine, the entire time her eyes were scanning the woods for a place to hide. "Take a minute." Katniss saw a cave-like structure down the river and said, "There's a little cave up ahead. Think you can make it?"

"Yeah," Peeta wasn't sure if he could, but he was willing to try. He wondered why the Gamemakers had turned the temperature in the arena down so much. It was freezing and his teeth were on the verge of chattering.

By the time they got to the cave Peeta was completely worn out. Katniss worked like a mad woman, layering pine needles on the floor of the rocky structure, setting up her sleeping bag and finally getting Peeta tucked into it.

"Katniss," Peeta's voice was tremulous. "I knew you'd find me."

She brushed the hair away from his eyes, "You would've found me if you could."

"Yes," Peeta lifted up his hand and trailed her braid through his fingers. As the day wore on, Peeta hoped to see a parachute with his medication, but it never came. He was certain that could mean only one thing. "Katniss, if I don't make it..."

"Don't!" Katniss put her fingers over his lips. "Don't talk like that."

Peeta pulled her hand away from his mouth and said, "If I don't..."

Katniss gripped the sides of his face and rested her head against his. "No, Peeta. You are not dying."

"Katniss," he whispered as he took her face in his hands.

"You can't leave me, Peeta." Her voice was shaking. "I just found you...do you hear me?" She choked out against his lips. "I just found you, so you are not leaving me. I forbid it. All right?"

Peeta lifted the corners of his mouth in a soft grin, "You forbid it, huh?"

"That's right. So no more talk of dying. Okay?" His skin was burning with fever underneath her hands. She was petrified that he was right. That he would die and if he did, Katniss didn't have a clue how she would go on without him.

"Okay." Peeta didn't know if he'd make it through another night before Katniss showed up at the river and now she was sitting before him begging him to live. He had fought for days to stay alive, just to make sure her image didn't appear in the sky. The least he could do was fight to stay alive for her now. "Who said I was dying? Not me." He

brushed his nose across hers and pulled her in for a hug. He could feel her smile against his cheek. He had been waiting for days to feel her next to him. To touch her again. He'd be damned if he let her go without a fight. "I won't leave you," he whispered in her ear.

"I won't leave you either," she whispered back.

She waited until he fell asleep before going to the cave's entrance. She tried to fashion a disguise, but it was useless. The day's events were catching up with her. She wanted to throw something. No, what she wanted to do was shoot an arrow through Cato's heart. Katniss let her frustration get the best of her. She ripped down the vines she placed at the entrance to the cave and heaved them across the forest as far as her arm could throw. The silver parachute was almost crushed by one of them. She ran to it, thinking, Haymitch did it, he got Peeta's medicine, but when she opened the card and read, "I'm sorry." She knew Peeta's cure wouldn't be found within the gift. Instead there was a pot of hot broth.

Katniss hated the Capitol for putting Peeta in this position. For putting his life in jeopardy. She was sure the look on her face told the viewing audience exactly that too. She set the pot of broth down on the ground and tried to get her bearings about her, but it was all too much. Her only hope was the sponsors. She found it hard to believe that she and Peeta didn't have enough of them to send in his medication unless... Unless, she thought, there was nothing that could be done for Peeta in the arena. That meant only one thing. Katniss had to win the Games and fast. She had to get Peeta back to the Capitol so they could cure him. In the meantime he needed his strength and the only way he could build that back up was to eat, but he couldn't stomach any food. No, but he could use a little broth. She let out a breath and said a silent thank you to Haymitch.

As Katniss knelt beside Peeta, a surge of love rushed through her. She had spent the entire day battling with herself. Forcing herself to push back her emotional responses to Peeta in order to care for his injuries. While she looked at Peeta's sleeping figure, she realized just how much she had come to miss him since they had been in the arena. How much she longed for the touch of his hand, the gentle sound of his voice and his lips. She missed his kiss. Katniss leaned over Peeta and placed a tender kiss against his forehead. He still had a fever, but she didn't feel it. All she could feel was her love for him. She pulled back and placed her lips against his, but before she could kiss him he flinched.

Their mouths were slightly opened and a hair apart as Peeta whispered, "Finally."

Katniss leaned in and placed a soft peck against Peeta's lips. "Haymitch sent you some soup." She looked over at the pot of broth sitting to their side and turned back to Peeta's waiting lips.

"The soup can wait," he said. "I can't."

Katniss could feel his breath against her skin as she whispered into his mouth, "Neither can I." Their arms encircled one another as they lips met.

74th Hunger Games

Challenge: We

Always Were Chapter 20: The Feast, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter 20: The Feast

If you haven't noticed by now, though the story is not strictly based on the book, I do write one chapter for each chapter in the book. Thank you to my beta readers S and A! Going through such lengthy chapters is a lot of work, so a big BRAVO! for them! Thank you to all of you who take the time and leave feedback or send me messages. I read each and every one of them and they mean a lot to me. Thanks! Now...

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

She was exhausted. Katniss had barely slept the night before and the physical exertion of taking care of Peeta earlier that day had worn her out, but there would be no rest for her and she knew it. She sat down to her own dinner and watched as the Capitol flashed its symbol in the

sky. There were no deaths, but she was certain that she and Peeta had provided plenty of entertainment for the viewing audience throughout the day. There was a queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach when she thought of everyone that had watched them, in what should've been, some very private moments, but privacy was non-existent in the Games. Katniss chastised herself for not thinking about that before indulging herself with Peeta. Katniss hated that the residents of the Capitol had been privy to hers and Peeta's conversations...touches...kisses. She berated herself for letting her emotions take over earlier. She thought of how much she and Peeta had shared after she roused him with her kiss.

"Finally," Peeta said.

"Haymitch sent you some soup." At that moment in time, the last thing on Katniss' mind was soup.

"The soup can wait...I can't." Peeta's voice sounded desperate.

"Neither can I," Katniss caved into her needs and succumbed to him.

Peeta lifted his head slightly off the ground and Katniss slipped her arms around his neck as his arms wrapped around her body. Her lips were full and moist as they treated him to what he had been craving. What they had both been craving. He took her bottom lip in his mouth and gave it a little suck. "I've missed you," he spoke into her mouth.

"I've missed you too," Katniss continued their kiss. She pulled one of her hands out from behind his neck and began threading her fingers through his hair. His arms pulled her body closer to his. She could feel her stomach tightening and her pulse quickening. They pulled apart for a brief second and Peeta started to brush his lips against hers. She felt him lick his own lips then lick hers and the tingle that went up her spine shook her very essence. By the time their kiss ended Katniss

could barely control her breathing. For a small moment in time she had forgotten where they were and why they were there, but Peeta's burning hot skin brought her back to reality. "How about some soup?" She spoke softly.

"I'd rather keep doing this," Peeta said.

"I'd rather you eat some soup," Katniss started to lift herself up, but Peeta pulled her back down.

"What if we did both?" He suggested.

Katniss lifted her head up and grinned at him. "If I say yes, will you eat?"

"Say, yes." Peeta's voice was sleepy.

"Yes."

"Okay...I'll eat."

Katniss propped Peeta up against the cave wall and took her station to the side of him. Peeta ate the first few spoonfuls of soup with no arguments, but then his eyelids began to droop. Katniss leaned in and placed a soft kiss against his lips, thinking, it worked before. Maybe he'll wake up now. She wasn't disappointed. "You can't eat if you're asleep." She lifted the spoon to his mouth and watched him as he opened his lips. With each spoonful his face seemed to turn sour. "Tastes bad, huh?"

"No," Peeta said. "I'm just..." he closed his eyes and began drifting off to sleep again.

"Come on, Peeta," she shook him gently.

His eyes slowly opened. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

"I wasn't. *You* were in the middle of a sentence." Katniss gave him another spoonful of soup. His head started to lull to the side, but she quickly scolded him. "I swear if you fall asleep again, I'm going to pour this over your head."

Peeta let out a little laugh and said, "No you won't, but I'll try and stay awake." One more spoonful of soup. "You know...you said you'd feed me *and* kiss me. I've barely gotten any kisses since eating this stuff. That's probably why I keep falling asleep."

"Where are my manners?" Katniss leaned in and placed another peck against his lips, but as she moved away from him he reached up and held her against him.

"Don't pull away. Not yet." He closed his eyes and kissed her forehead. "Can we take a break from eating for a minute, Katniss?"

She didn't want to stop feeding him. She wanted him to pick up the bowl of broth and drink it down, but she could see how hard it was for him so she said, "Sure, but only a minute." She placed the broth down and sat facing him.

"Hold my hands." Katniss placed her hands in his. "Would it be bad if I didn't finish the soup?"

"Yes."

"I really don't think I can, Katniss."

"You have to. We'll just take our time, that's all." She positioned herself next to him with her back against the cave wall and let him put his

head on her shoulder. "If you need a few breaks, we can do that. I just don't want you falling asleep, okay?"

"Okay." Peeta lifted up his head and said, "I'll try."

"Why don't you talk to me for a little while?"

"What do you want to talk about?" Peeta asked.

"For starters you can tell me how you did that with the mud. I didn't even recognize you, Peeta."

"Impressive, aren't I?" Peeta put his head back down on her shoulder.

"Very." Katniss admitted. "I've never seen anyone do that in the Games before."

"It wasn't that hard. I just mixed up a little mud, dirt...some rocks and let nature do the rest."

"You know...after we win this thing. The camouflage station is going to be the busiest section of the training center. You'll probably start a trend." Katniss picked up the soup. "Let's try some more." He ate a few more bites and she thanked him with a few more kisses. "Need another break?" She asked. He nodded his head in an answer.

He took hold of her hand and began playing with her fingers. "I keep thinking I'm dreaming or something...being with you right now..." He raised her hand and pressed his lips firmly into the palm of it. "I thought about you every single day."

"I thought about you too," she bent down and kissed his hand in turn. "I used to talk to you at night. Not out loud or anything, but..." She leaned her head on his shoulder. "...in my head."

"What did you say to me?"

She gave her shoulder a little shrug and said, "All sorts of things." It was like all the lonely nights she had spent in the arena were converging on her emotions at that moment. "I missed you...missed spending time with you during training...eating with you...we spent all that time together getting ready for the Games and then you were gone." Her eyes closed as she admitted, "I was lonely without you near."

"I used to say goodnight to you," Peeta confessed. "I'd look up at the moon and say it to you every single night."

"Me too," their fingers began doing a little dance in her lap.

Peeta smiled and said, "I used to think...maybe she's thinking of me."

"I was."

Peeta held one of her hands between both of his. "I saw you one morning...before the fire. You were sitting on a rock by the river and staring at a flower."

Katniss lifted her head and looked at him. "You saw me? Why didn't you come to me? Why didn't you..."

"The Careers were close by. I had to get them away from you."

"Peeta," she rested her forehead against his. "I wish you had never joined up with them."

"Doesn't matter anymore. We're together now." He lifted his hand to her face. "Katniss, I never thought I'd be able to look into your eyes again...see you again..."

Her lips brushed against his. "I love your eyes, Peeta. Love the way they look at me. Nobody sees me the way you do...nobody." Their kiss was one of love. Of sorrow for the time they spent apart...for the things they wanted to share and couldn't. It was slow and simple and the most intimate moment of both of their lives.

Katniss stood at the entrance of the cave and cringed at the intimate memory. Peeta had the ability to bring something out in her, something that no one else ever could and that was need. It was the main reason she was afraid of him. Afraid of what he made her feel. When she indulged in those feelings, she and Peeta were usually alone, tonight however, the entire nation had been watching and it made her sick thinking about it. She told herself that she would no longer give the residents of the Capitol the satisfaction of seeing such a personal side of them again. She'd still play the part of the Star Crossed Lover, but no one, except for Peeta would ever see that needy, indulgent side of her again.

Katniss closed her eyes and gave her head a little shake. Prim was watching that, she thought. And my mother...and Gale. Gale. She wondered what Gale would make of all of their kissing. If he had figured out that she and Peeta had been seeing one another prior to the Games. Gale knew Katniss well enough to know she wouldn't fall for Peeta immediately after their interviews. It took Gale what seemed like an eternity to get the slightest bit of personal information out of her after they had first met, so he must know that something is up with their whole romance thing. Katniss wished she had listened to Peeta and told Gale about their relationship. You can't go back in time, Katniss. She reminded herself. All you can do is move forward and worry about it when you get home. Right now she had to worry about the Careers. Surely they would be out searching for her and Peeta now that they were a team. Would they find Peeta's blood trail and come upon them in the cave? The only encouraging thing Katniss

could think of was that the Careers were right on top of Peeta and they had no clue. She hoped the Careers would search for them in a different part of the arena.

She loaded her bow and arrow and stood guard next to Peeta as he slept, but the Gamemakers had dropped the temperature down so low Katniss could barely feel her fingers. She crawled into the sleeping bag with Peeta and sighed when she felt its warmth. It took less than a minute to realize that the warmth she was feeling was coming from Peeta's body. He was burning up with fever. It was too soon to give him more fever pills. She berated herself for not paying more attention when her mother tried to teach her how to care for the ill, but Katniss hated to be around sick people. Watching anyone suffer caused her mental anguish. She just didn't have the gift of healing like her mother and Prim did or the stomach for it. She tried to remember what her mother would do when she or Prim would get sick. Katniss' first instinct was to pull Peeta out of the sleeping bag and let the cold air bring his body temperature down, but this would only be a temporary fix. She remembered when Prim was little and had a high fever. Her mother wrapped her up in some blankets and when Katniss asked why; her mother said she was trying to sweat the fever out of Prim. Katniss used the empty soup pot and poured some water in it, then placed some strips of bandages in it. She squeezed them out and laid them across Peeta's forehead, rotating them, flipping them and trying her best to bring his temperature down, while tucking the sleeping bag firmly around his body. When enough time had passed she gently roused Peeta from his sleep.

"Peeta?" She placed her hand against his cheek as she spoke into his ear. "Peeta? I need you to wake up." When he didn't move Katniss began to worry. "Peeta?" Her voice got a little louder as she shook his shoulder.

"Mmmm," he mumbled.

"I need you to take more fever pills." Katniss opened Peeta's mouth and placed them on his tongue. "Come on," she said with determination. She lifted his head and watched as he opened his eyes. "Drink this." Katniss gave him some water and wiped the drops that dribbled down his chin, off with her fingers.

"Katniss? I was just dreaming about you." Peeta said wearily. He lifted up his hand and held onto her braid. "I love your hair. Have I ever told you that?" He closed his eyes and his hand slowly slid down her braid. "I've always wondered what it would feel like to run my fingers through it." He turned his head and let sleep consume him.

In the back of Katniss mind she was wondering how she would be able to keep the side of her, that Peeta brought out, away from the Games, when he tapped into those emotions so easily. She placed a kiss against his cheek and changed his cool compress. An action she'd repeat countless times throughout her sleepless night.

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Gale didn't sleep on the sofa that night. He had no interest in watching Katniss and Peeta in their hideout. It was bad enough he had to listen to them while he helped his mother out in the kitchen. At one point Gale even turned to his mother and said, "Should Posy really be watching this?" Katniss was trying to coax Peeta into eating some broth by plying him with kisses.

"Would you like me to tell them to shut it off?" Hazelle asked.

Gale glanced back at his brothers and sister as they watched the television set. He looked at the screen and saw Katniss resting her head on Peeta's shoulder. "Whatever. I don't care. Let them watch it."

He turned away from the television set again. He tried to block out the sounds, but then he heard Katniss say, "I love your eyes, Peeta. Love the way they look at me. Nobody sees me the way you do...nobody." It was followed up with silence and then Gale heard what sounded like a whimper coming from Katniss. He threw down the article of clothing he had in his hand and left their house without looking to see what was being played out on the television set behind him.

Why did Katniss think Peeta saw a side of her that Gale didn't? What made Peeta so special? Gale was trying to understand what was happening. He knew her better than Peeta ever could. He blew a breath out and thought; no...Peeta's currently the one kissing Katniss. I'd say he knows her a lot better than you right now.

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"Quillan, darling. How have you been? I haven't seen you in ages," Effie air kissed one of the wealthiest sponsors at the Capitol's party.

"Effie, dear." The tall man held his hands out to her and returned her welcome. "It's been too long."

"Glass of Shiraz," Effie ordered a drink from an attendant and stopped herself before saying please. Surely a slip of the tongue like that wouldn't go unnoticed amongst her company. "Tell me, how have you been enjoying the Games this year? I think these are the best to date."

"Your tributes from District 12 have certainly turned up the heat in the arena." Quillan gestured to the television screen where Katniss and Peeta were currently in the middle of, what Effie determined should've been, a very personal moment for the duo.

Effie gave one of her trademark smiles and said, "They just can't keep their hands off of each other, can they?"

"I'd say." Quillan laughed. "Probably a good thing the boy's injured. Who knows what they'd be doing otherwise."

Effie was repulsed by what the man was alluding to, but she ignored it and said, "Considering they're from District 12, who knows? However, I was very impressed with their manners when they were in the Capitol. I could barely tell they came from such an impoverished background. And the way they overcame their barbarism was truly remarkable." The need to defend Katniss and Peeta seemed to occur naturally to Effie, but since it was her job as escort to talk up the pair, Effie was sure Quillan would assume that's what she was doing.

"My wife and I were just speaking about that. If we didn't know any better, we'd swear they were from District 2 or 4. Peeta certainly fought like a champion and Katniss...she's a little rough around the edges, but the girl certainly knows her way around a bow and arrow. Much better than that Glimmer tribute from District 1. What a colossal waste of money it would've been had I sponsored them this year." Effie knew that those were the districts he preferred to sponsor. He was a Career lover. In all the years that Effie worked for the Capitol, she had never seen him sponsor any district other than One, Two and Four.

"How is marriage treating you?" Though Effie wanted to talk about the Games, it was imperative she wait for the sponsor's wife.

"Wonderfully. I do believe five's the charm," he laughed.

Effie's laughter joined his as she took her glass of wine from the attendant without making any form of contact with the servant. "I must say hello. Is she here?" Effie began looking around the room.

"Yes," Quillan started looking for his wife. When he located her he said, "She's speaking with the mentors of District 2 right now, but I'll grab her."

"Oh, don't. I'm sure she'll find her way to you shortly." Effie knew very well where his wife was. It was the reason she stopped to talk to the man. "Wouldn't want to leave you alone for too long."

"Not around someone as attractive as you, Effie." She tilted her head as if she were flattered and tried to hold back the look of disgust.

They spoke for several minutes until his wife finally joined them. "Oh there she is," Effie said as though she were expecting royalty. "Aren't you the picture of perfection?" Effie put her hands out to take Quillan's wife's and placed a kiss about two inches away from the woman's face.

"Effie, darling. You're looking spectacular." The woman turned to her husband and said, "Quillan, my dear, you're not flirting with our favorite escort are you?"

"Never darling," Quillan placed a kiss on his wife's cheek. "We were just talking about the Star Crossed Lovers."

"Effie, they are darling," his wife said. "I am completely enamored with them. I keep telling Quillan we should live a little on the edge this year and sponsor District 12."

"We wouldn't turn you down," Effie said with a smile. "Haymitch is always at the ready for a sponsor."

"See, Quillan?" The man's wife brushed up against his side. "They'd be happy to take our money. Peeta didn't have any problems getting a gift in the arena once the rule change was announced."

"I'm sure they would love to have us sponsor them, but...I'd like to wait awhile and see." Quillan had a peculiar look on his face. Effie took this as her signal to dig a little deeper.

"Of course Peeta didn't have any problems receiving his gift. Have you heard something to the wiser?" Effie's voice was overly sweet. Just the way an escort's should be.

Quillan's wife looked over both of her shoulders and said, "We've just heard a few rumors milling about..." She looked at the mentors from District 2 and continued. "...some of the tributes having a few...set backs in the arena."

"Now. Now. You know it's against the rules for Effie to ask about such things, dear." Quillan reminded his wife.

"Quillan," Effie put her hand on his arm as if aghast. "I would never dream of asking about the goings on with other district's tributes," she paused. "If the information was volunteered on the other hand..."

The sponsor's wife checked to make sure no one was looking and said, "You didn't hear this from me, but..."

An hour later Effie and Haymitch met back up in their suite as planned to find Cinna and Portia sitting on the sofa watching Katniss feed Peeta the last of his broth.

"Turn that up," Haymitch ordered.

Cinna pushed the volume button on the remote and gave both Haymitch and Effie a befuddled look. "Something wrong?"

Effie made a slight gesture with her fingertips as if calling the pair over to her and Haymitch and they began discussing the information that was gathered at the party.

"District 2 can't afford some type of defensive equipment," Effie whispered.

"District 5 needs food. She's been stealing from the Careers for the most part, but since Katniss blew up the supplies, she's barely had anything to eat. She'll probably starve to death before long."

"You mean they've upped the price on all of the food for her?" Effie asked.

"Everything. The girl can't even get a stick of gum without paying through the nose for it," Haymitch answered.

Cinna and Portia had no clue what they were talking about. "What's happening here?" Cinna asked quietly.

Haymitch held his finger up as if to silence Cinna and said, "District 11 needs water. Whatever supply he had in that field magically dried up overnight. If he doesn't get something to drink soon, he's going to have to make a trip out to the lake and face the Careers."

"And the price on that has gone up too?" Asked Effie.

"On *anything* liquid for him," Haymitch nodded. "The kid can't even get a popsicle out there. Gamemakers have thought of everything."

"That's six out of six tributes then," Effie said.

Cinna looked back and forth between Effie and Haymitch and said, "Can someone please tell me what's going on?"

Haymitch filled Cinna and Portia in on Effie's theory and watched as their faces distorted.

"Why?" Portia asked. "What would be the purpose of doing that? Katniss has enough arrows, so why bother raising the price on those?"

"Katniss doesn't need arrows, that was probably done just to cover their bases... Maybe they're trying to think ahead. I'm not sure." Haymitch said. "But Peeta needs medication and we all know, with this new rule in place, Peeta's needs might as well be the same as Katniss'."

"We know that, but how do the Gamemakers?" Cinna asked.

"Cinna, the girl put herself in harm's way for Rue...a tribute from another district...of course the Gamemakers know Katniss will risk it all for Peeta," Haymitch informed them.

Cinna couldn't argue. "Any clue as to what the Gamemakers are planning?" He asked.

"Don't know." Haymitch shook his head.

Effie began thinking out loud. "The Gamemakers have made sure everyone is in dire need of something. Now they won't kill all of them off. Where would the fun be in that?" Effie's eyes were getting shifty as she tried to get in the frame of mind of a Gamemaker.

"What if..." Haymitch started.

"Shush," Effie put her finger up. "I'm thinking." She started doing a little pace and stepped back to the group. "The Gamemakers have the items available...they know the tributes will risk their lives to save their lives...and Katniss will risk hers to save Peeta's..." Effie still couldn't figure out what the Gamemakers' plan was, but she tried to get into their heads. "They'll want to force them together. So, what would force the tributes together to fight for something? A natural disaster, perhaps? No...no...where would Peeta's medication fit into that? Hmmm...If they *all* needed food then I'd say they were planning a feast, but that's no good...only District 5 needs food. What else could they..."

"What did you say?" Haymitch interrupted her.

"I don't know. What did I say?" Effie asked.

"A feast?"

"But that's for food, Haymitch." Portia said.

"What if it wasn't for food? What if..." The entire group's eyes met as they realized what the Gamemakers' next move would be.

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Katniss was relieved to find that Peeta's fever had gone down some by morning. Hopefully he'd be in the mood to eat something, she thought as she mixed up some of Rue's berries with water. She walked into the cave to find him struggling to get up.

"Where have you been? I've been worried sick about you." Peeta's brow was furrowed.

Katniss chuckled as she helped prop him against the wall. "You've been worried about me? Have you looked at yourself lately?" She walked up to him and ruffled the top of his hair. "I made you some breakfast." She sat next to him and began stirring up the berry mush she made him.

"I thought Cato or Clove might have gotten to you. Cato likes to hunt at night." He had almost said, Cato likes to hunt for *you* at night, but stopped himself in the nick of time.

"Which one is Clove?"

"From District 2. She's still alive, right?" He hoped Katniss would say no.

"Yeah," Katniss looked disappointed. "There's the Careers, us, Thresh and Foxface. That's what I nicknamed the girl from Five." She gave Peeta the once over and said, "You look much better today. How do you feel?"

"I have to say, this is an enormous improvement over the mud. Clean clothes, medicine, a sleeping bag...and you."

Katniss felt her heart swell and instinctively raised her hand to his cheek.

Peeta took her hand and pressed it to his lips. He closed his eyes and tried to take it all in. She was there. Katniss was sitting right there with him. He lifted his hand to her face and trailed his fingers down her cheek. "You still haven't kissed me good morning."

The expression on Peeta's face was causing Katniss to lose herself again and she wasn't about to give the Capitol audience another

glimpse into hers and Peeta's private life. "And you won't be getting any until you've eaten."

"You're no fun." Peeta dropped his hand and put on a pout.

Katniss tried to hold back her smile and said, "Yup. I'm a big meany. Now eat." She shoved a spoon of berry mush into his mouth.

"No fun at all," Peeta said with his mouth full.

Peeta was surprised to find he could stomach all of the food Katniss had given him without the queasy side effects he had from the broth. He watched Katniss eat some groosling and noticed her yawning. Had she been awake the entire night, he wondered. "You haven't slept."

"I'm fine," she said which was quickly followed up with another yawn.

"Why don't you sleep now and I'll keep watch? I'll wake you if something happens." Peeta saw the hesitant look on her face. "Or you can stay up forever? I mean...if you think that'll work." He gave her a discerning stare.

"All right," Katniss hated giving into him, but she hadn't slept since the night they announced the rule change and that had been nothing short of restless. "But just for a couple of hours." She flattened out the sleeping bag next to him. "Make sure you wake me." Peeta nodded and turned to stare out the cave's entrance. "I mean it. Just a few..."

"Katniss..." Peeta looked down at her. "Shut up and go to sleep." He was granted one of her scowls which Peeta smiled at. "Close your eyes." He began brushing his fingers across her forehead, moving the loose strands of hair out of her eyes. "I'll wake you in a few hours," He spoke tenderly to her. When her eyes closed he stared at the cave's entrance again, but his hand kept stroking Katniss' head. It felt so

good...natural. It reminded him of the times, after they had eaten their lunch under the oak, Katniss would place her head in his lap and he would do this to her. In no time at all, Peeta heard Katniss' deep and steady breathing. She looked so peaceful when she slept, he thought. So beautiful. To him, she was always beautiful. After a few hours Peeta thought about waking her, but he didn't have the heart to. She hadn't moved a muscle since she fell asleep and he was sure that she hadn't gotten much rest since the start of the Games. Several hours later he felt her body shift and glanced down at her.

"Hi," Katniss' first thought was she could wake up next to him every day of her life. Her next thought was she overslept. She felt way too rested and it was obvious by the sky it was late afternoon. "Peeta, you were supposed to wake me up after a couple of hours."

"What for? Nothing's going on here. Besides I like watching you sleep." Katniss sat up next to him. "You don't scowl in your sleep. Improves your looks a lot."

Katniss scowled. Peeta grinned.

Katniss lifted her hand to his forehead to check his temperature and noticed his fever had returned. "Have you been drinking?"

"Yeah," Peeta couldn't remember if he had or not.

Katniss squinted and said, "Mmmm hmmm," as she lifted a full bottle of water. "I can tell. That must be why this is still full." She gave him more pills and handed him the water. "Drink it...all of it."

"You're awfully demanding." Peeta sipped at the water and found it to be refreshing. It cooled his dry throat. He put the bottle down and looked up at her. She was standing over him and staring at him. "Are you really going to stand there and watch me drink?"

"Yes I am." Katniss placed her hand on her hip.

"Surely you have better things to do...unless you can't keep your eyes off of me. That would explain a lot," Peeta grinned at her.

Katniss rolled her eyes and said, "Drink the water." She started going through the backpack and got out what she needed to treat Peeta's injuries. Katniss looked at the sting under his ear and saw an improvement. "That looks good." She knelt down and began taking off Peeta's shirt to address his other wounds. "These burns look a lot better." She applied a little more ointment to them. "So does this sting." She helped him put his shirt back on.

"What's next Dr. Everdeen?" Peeta grinned at her.

"I've got to take a look at your leg." Katniss hoped that treating the leg with the leaves and bandaging it up may have helped it, but she was wrong. The swelling in his leg gotten much worse. The skin around his wound was tight and shiny and he had red streaks going up his thigh. Katniss steeled herself as she lied to Peeta. She hoped he wouldn't figure out how bad his situation was. "There's more swelling, but the pus is gone." Katniss could hear her voice trembling as she said it.

"I know what blood poisoning is, Katniss. Even if my mother isn't a healer." Peeta could see her struggling to regain her composure.

"Hey," he ran his hand down her arm. "You okay?"

Katniss was staring at Peeta's leg. She knew that the blood poisoning would kill him in a few days if they didn't get a hold of some anti-infection medications, yet Peeta was still worried about her welfare. How *she* was doing. Katniss pulled herself together and said, "You can just outlast the others and they'll cure it back at the Capitol."

"Sounds good to me," Peeta tried to help ease her worries.

Katniss wrapped his leg back up. The overwhelming need for air took control of her senses. "You need to eat. We've got to keep your strength up. I'm going to go make you some soup."

"Don't light a fire. It's not worth it."

Katniss grabbed what she needed and nodded at him. "We'll see."

She was hoping to feel some sort of breeze coming off of the water as she headed downstream, but the Gamemakers had cranked the heat up in the arena and it was sweltering. As she mixed some ingredients for Peeta's soup she began thinking of a way she'd be able to win the Games with Peeta in his current condition. She couldn't leave him alone. He could barely sit up by himself, so he'd never be able to defend himself if someone came along. Even Foxface could kill him in his current state, but Foxface's strategy had been to defend, not attack, so maybe... There were still two Careers left. They could very well have split up and gone on the hunt... Peeta! Katniss' pulse started racing. She had left him alone for too long. She left the pot of soup on a boulder and let the heat from the sun warm it for her as she raced back to the cave. He was stretched out on the sleeping bag and staring into space.

Peeta's mind was racing. He knew if he didn't get a hold of some medication soon he would be dead within days. What would that do to Katniss, he wondered? How would that affect the rest of the Games for her? Would she fight just as hard to win it and keep her promise to him and Prim? Or would she shut down like she had after he had cut his hand? Something inside of him said it would be the latter. She was strong and his mother was right about one thing, Katniss was a survivor, but she felt as though his injuries were her fault. She didn't come right out and say it, but Peeta knew she was thinking it. If he died, she would feel responsible for it. He could see her taking

revenge on the Careers, but would she have the perseverance to kill off Thresh and Foxface too? He could feel her presence the second she stepped into the cave's entrance. "You're back," he smiled trying to put thoughts of his death to the back of his mind.

Katniss nodded and said, "I wanted to check on you. See if you needed anything."

Peeta lifted the corner of his mouth in a little grin and thought to himself, I need you to take my mind off of my worries. I'm worried about you, Katniss. About how you'll be once I die. "No. I'm good, but thanks."

"Sure," Katniss walked to him and felt his burning hot forehead. She began putting wet compresses on him, but they turned hot the instant they touched his skin. "You sure you don't need anything." She was worried sick about him.

Peeta thought for a second and said, "You could tell me a story." He loved it when she told him about her adventures in the woods, but this wasn't the place for that. Maybe, he thought, he shouldn't have asked.

"A story? About what?" Katniss had no clue what kind of story she could tell Peeta. He pretty much knew everything about her, so telling him something would be redundant.

"Something funny."

"Funny? I wouldn't really call myself comedic." Katniss changed another one of his compresses.

"You had me laughing during training. You're very funny, Katniss." Peeta gave the end of her braid a little tug and said, "I'm sure you can think of something."

Trying to figure out something to tell Peeta about would be difficult. Katniss couldn't exactly talk about her hunting expeditions. She didn't want to come right out and flaunt that she hunted in the woods by her house, that could get the Peacekeepers in trouble and some of them were very good customers of hers, plus they all involved Gale and Peeta would hate that. The only person she could think of that could bring out laughter in her as easily as Peeta was Prim.

"Did I ever tell you about the cat that kept coming back?" Katniss saw Peeta's eyes light up as she began regaling him with her tale. "Mind you...I didn't find it funny at the time, but now...I guess I can laugh about it."

"Tell me." Peeta settled himself in as he listened.

Katniss shook her head at the memory of her sister walking into their home with their scraggly cat, Buttercup. "Prim had found a kitten. An *ugly* kitten. Its head was overly huge, it was mangy...no hair on its ears or some parts of his body for that matter. Like I said," She glanced at Peeta. "It was an ugly kitten, but my sister thought it was the most beautiful creature in the world and she begged me to keep it. She wanted to call it, Buttercup."

"Of course you said, yes." Peeta knew Katniss hated Buttercup and she would never have agreed to keep it so easily.

"You mean I said, no!" Katniss corrected him. "I said, Prim, that cat is going to eat our food and bring fleas into this house. I don't want it here." Katniss had tried to drown the cat in a bucket of water, but she didn't think she should say that, so she continued with the next part of the story. "My sister begged me with those..." Katniss sighed. "...I'm a sucker when it comes to Prim's big eyes. So I said, you can keep him, but he's not sleeping in this house at night. He's got to stay outside. Prim was just so happy that I had said yes, she didn't even think about

the cat being outdoors. I thought, good...great! That cat can live outside and maybe he'll wander off or something. That first night she put him out front, but by morning he was asleep at the foot of our bed. You can imagine how mad I was at that."

Peeta smiled up at her visualizing Katniss waking up with Buttercup at her feet.

"I picked that cat up and threw him out the door. Prim, I said, if you bring that cat back into this house at night, I'm going to make you get rid of him." Katniss stuck her feet out in front of her and began tapping her toes together. "Now my sweet little sister decides to look me in the face and tell me a bold face lie. Oh, Katniss, I didn't let him in the house," Katniss mimicked Prim's voice. "Sure you didn't Prim. The cat can turn doorknobs, I say. That next night, before we went to bed I tell Prim to put the cat out and watch her as she does. We go to sleep and sure enough I wake up the next morning and see that mangy critter lying at my feet, licking at his fur as though my bed was his own personal grooming station." Katniss' face turned sour at the memory. "So I pick him up and start yelling at Prim. I told you... I said to her. I told you if you brought this cat back into the house at night he was gone. So I walk the cat all the way down to the meadow and leave him there. I come home and Prim's sniffing, saying, I didn't bring him in Katniss. I swear it. Now I know that Prim's not lying to me because she would never come right out and defy me like that, plus she was pretty upset. So I look at my mother and said, did you let that thing back in? She puts up her hands," Katniss lifted up her hands to mimic her mother's motions. "And says to me, don't look at me. I didn't let it back in." Katniss leaned back on her hands and continued. "Prim calmed down fairly quickly, but all the way to school I could tell she was looking for Buttercup. I almost felt bad about throwing him in the meadow." Katniss turned her head to Peeta's. "Almost!"

Peeta smiled up at Katniss knowing that Prim had eventually gotten her way since the cat was a permanent resident at their house.

"So I get home that night and who do you think I see sitting at the front of our house eating entrails?"

"Buttercup?"

"Buttercup!" Katniss answered. "I was furious. I thought, surely my mother couldn't have gone out and found this thing for Prim while I was at school? I walk into the house and accost my mother. Did you bring that thing back here, I ask her. And she says, nope. He just started meowing at the door about an hour ago, so I fed him." Katniss squinted her eyes remembering how mad she had been at her mother's actions. "Now I know, once Prim sees this cat again, I'll never be able to get rid of him and of course, Prim was already thrilled that Buttercup had found his way home so I was stuck." Katniss shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Prim, I tell her, that cat still isn't sleeping in this house. Oh no, Katniss, she says. I swear it! I never let him back in at after you put him out at night. I don't know how he's getting in. Now this gives me pause. I'm thinking...has this cat found a way to get into our house at night? I begin looking all around the place for holes in the flooring, or something like that, but I can't find a thing so I know it has to be my mother or my sister letting the cat back in. Now I don't mind that the cat is there during the day, I'm at school and all, but when I get home, I don't want that thing to be around pestering me. Let alone while I'm asleep. So that night I tell my mother I have a little cough and maybe it would be best if Prim slept with her, so I don't get Prim sick." Katniss lifted the corner of her mouth in a mischievous grin. "But I'm not planning on sleeping."

"What are you going to do?"

"I was going to catch the culprit in the act." Katniss lifted her eyebrows and waggled them. "This way I could blame them for me getting rid of that cat once and for all." Katniss tucked her legs under her and continued, "I waited until my mother and sister were asleep."

"Was the cat out for the night?" Peeta's eyes were a glow.

"Yup. I put him out myself. I walked around the house to make sure there were no windows opened downstairs or anything like that too. And once my mother and sister were asleep, I snuck down the stairs and hid behind the chair in the living room. It gave me a perfect view of the front door and if somebody had come downstairs, they'd never see me there."

"So who was it?"

Katniss shrugged her shoulders and said, "Don't know. I waited there all night long, Peeta. I sat up and didn't get a wink of sleep and nobody came down the stairs. Now I had about two hours before school was starting so I thought I'd try to get in a little bit of sleep before hand and when I walked into my bedroom who do you think was sprawled out across the middle of my bed?"

Peeta's eyebrows shot up, "Not Buttercup?!"

"Yes!" Katniss slapped the ground next to her. "I was livid! It took everything I had not to strangle that little monster and he knew it too. He just gave me this look like...I know you hate me, but what can you do about it? I'm not going anywhere." Katniss took in a breath through her nose and blew it out. "So now I know it's not my mother or my sister letting the cat in. He's somehow found a way into our house, but I can't figure it out. I go to school that day; my mother wouldn't let me stay home." Katniss sneered.

"Did you tell her you were up all night?"

"Yes and she said it was my own fault for being so stubborn."

"Your mom's got a point. You are stubborn." Katniss glared at Peeta.

"Sorry," he patted her lap. "Go on and finish."

"Needless to say, I was exhausted." Katniss smiled and remembered, "I even fell asleep in Beast's class."

"Oh my God! Was that then? I remember when that happened."

"You do?"

"Yeah. Mrs. Beasterson said you couldn't come back to class unless you wrote a letter of apology explaining why you fell asleep in class." Peeta remembered it well.

"I can't believe you remember that." Katniss was surprised.

"Fortunately for me, Gale heard about it and turned a letter in for me."

"Gale?" Peeta squinted as he asked, "What makes you think it was Gale?"

Katniss shrugged and said, "Who else would do that?"

Peeta gave his head a nod and said, "Certainly not me. I'd never steal one of your older assignments from the Beast's drawer and copy your handwriting or anything like that."

Katniss gave Peeta a discerning look and said, "Peeta?" Katniss had always wondered how Gale had found out about the incident in her class since he was two years ahead of her. She had always assumed it had been Gale that bailed her out of trouble with the teacher. And when she mentioned it to him the next day in the woods, he didn't

deny it either. "Was that you?" Katniss pointed her finger at him. "Did you write that letter?"

Peeta lifted his arm up and placed it under his head. "Finish your story and I'll tell you."

"Just tell me."

"Finish the story," Peeta mimicked Katniss voice.

"I'm pretty much done."

Peeta shook his head and said, "But how...how did Buttercup keep getting back in the house at night?"

"Oh yeah..." Katniss leaned back. "It was summer out, so it was hot. We pretty much slept with our windows opened all the time."

"I thought you checked to make sure they were closed?"

"I did. The downstairs windows were closed every night, but not my bedroom window. It wasn't until it started raining one night and I shut it that I finally got my answers. About thirty minutes after that I hear this sound. I thought a branch had been tapping against my window pane from the storm or something, but it was Buttercup. That nasty cat was sitting on the second story window ledge practically knocking on my window...begging to come in from the rain."

Peeta started to laugh and said, "Did you let him in?"

"Well..." Katniss turned her face from his and said, "Turns out Buttercup is a good mouser. He catches the occasional rat too. I mean...there's no vermin anywhere near my house and my mom feeds him scraps and stuff so..."

"Of course that's why you let him back in. I'm sure it has nothing to do with your sister who you love so much you took her place during the reaping." Peeta grinned as Katniss glared at him.

"He is a good mouser!"

"I'm sure he is, Katniss." Peeta laughed.

"Okay...so now you tell me...did you write that apology letter to the Beast for me?" Katniss' eyes were accusing.

Peeta knew it was time to come clean. "Yes, I did."

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Gale watched Katniss from the square after making some early morning trades. He couldn't help but smile at the memory of Katniss' frustration. He remembered her telling him about Buttercup when they were in the woods. Gale had told her to let Prim keep the cat. That they could find some extra game for it if they needed to, but Katniss refused to take food out of anyone's mouth. Fortunately her mother fed the cat the entrails of their kills so the cat took away nothing from her family, but Katniss had been determined to find out how it kept getting into her house. At the time, Katniss was nothing more than a friend to him. Now when he listened to her telling Peeta about Buttercup, Gale felt a surge of love run through him. He hated it. To make it worse, she had mentioned Gale to Peeta and Peeta was telling Katniss the truth about a letter he had written to one of their teachers, Mrs. Beasterson who the kids at school nicknamed the Beast. Katniss had assumed it was Gale and when she mentioned it to him he hadn't a clue what she was talking about, but then she showed it to him and he asked her, "You think I wrote this?" When she

said no one else would ever do anything like that for her, Gale just folded the letter back up and said, "Okay." He never really admitted to doing it or not doing it, but now Katniss knew Gale had nothing to do with helping her out of that sticky situation with Mrs. Beasterson. Gale listened to Peeta as he told Katniss the truth about the letter.

"Okay...so now you tell me...did you write that apology letter to the Beast?"

"Yes, I did." Peeta smiled.

"Why? I had no intention of writing that thing!"

"Which is why I did it *for* you." Peeta said.

"But...how?"

"I have to say, it was a lot easier to get a hold of one of your old assignments than it was to channel my inner Katniss."

Katniss smiled and said, "Your inner Katniss?"

"See...I knew you'd never write that letter and I also knew that if you didn't, Mrs. Beasterson would make you transfer classes. She did that with one of our old classmates, Ewa Lynch."

"I don't remember her."

"That's because she got transferred into another class," Peeta told her. "Now I couldn't have that." Peeta picked up Katniss' hand and held it. "I knew I'd have to write that letter for you. I waited until Mrs. Beasterson had left the classroom for lunch and snuck back in so I could get a hold of one of your old assignments. I had to make it look like your handwriting, but I wasn't worried. Art is my specialty, after all." Peeta grinned. "Copying your work would be easy, but trying to

figure out what to say...that would be a hard one. I spent my entire lunch thinking about how you'd say you were sorry and then it hit me...you wouldn't say you were sorry and you most certainly wouldn't tell her why you fell asleep in class, so that's how I came up with the letter."

Katniss peered at Peeta and said, "Okay...if you wrote it, what did it say?"

"That was pretty ingenious on my part." Peeta smiled and got a thoughtful look on his face, cleared his throat and began reciting the letter by heart. "Mrs. Beasterson, I'm sure you think because I dozed off in your class that gives you the right to know my personal business, but it doesn't. What goes on outside of this school in my private life is exactly that, private. However, if you feel you must have an apology for my actions, then I offer you one. Katniss Everdeen."

Katniss laughed and said, "You did write it! Why didn't you tell me?"

Peeta looked away and said, "Don't know. Guess I didn't want you to get mad at me for butting in or anything."

"I don't think I could ever get mad at you, Peeta." Katniss placed her hand against his forehead to check his temperature. "Thank you for doing that."

"Like I said...I couldn't have you transferred out of class."

The sound of the trumpets caused Gale to wonder what the Gamemakers were up to now. Katniss had jumped up and aimed her bow and arrow at the cave's entrance then sat back down when she heard Claudius Templesmith speaking, "Attention Tributes! Attention! Commencing at sunrise, there'll be a feast tomorrow at the Cornucopia. This will be no ordinary occasion. Each of you needs

something...desperately and we plan on being...generous hosts. Think hard about refusing to show up. For some of you, this will be your last chance."

Gale could see the fortitude in Katniss' eyes and the fear in Peeta's.

"No," Peeta said to her. "You're not risking your life for me."

"Who said I was?" Katniss shrugged.

"So, you're not going?" Peeta asked.

"Of course, I'm not going. Give me some credit. Do you think I'm running straight into some free-for-all against Cato, Clove *and* Thresh? Don't be stupid. I'll let them fight it out. We'll see who's in the sky tomorrow night and work out a plan from there." Katniss tried to play aloof.

Both Peeta and Gale could see right through her.

"You're such a bad liar, Katniss. I don't know how you've survived this long." Peeta mimicked Katniss, "Buttercup's a great mouser. Your leg looks fine...just a little more swollen. Of course, I'm not going."

"Fine! I'm going and you can't stop me!" Katniss stood up and slammed her fists against her legs.

"I might not be able to stop you, but I can follow you." Gale had to admire Peeta for challenging Katniss so easily. "I might not make it to the Cornucopia, but if I'm yelling your name, I bet someone can find me and then I'll be dead for sure."

"You wouldn't dare?" Katniss turned on him. "You won't get a hundred yards on that leg!"

"Then I'll drag myself." Peeta reached out and grabbed Katniss' leg. "You go. I go." He stared at her until she dropped to her knees.

"What am I supposed to do, Peeta? Sit here and watch you die?" She leaned over him and brushed his hair back. "Don't ask me to do that."

"I won't die. I promise. If you promise not to go." Katniss started shaking her head as if making the promise was the hardest thing she'd have to do. "I told you I wouldn't leave you...and I'm not going to, Katniss. But you told me you wouldn't leave me either...so are you going to go back on that? Are you going to leave me, Katniss?" He whispered and pulled her close to him. "Don't leave me," he begged her.

Katniss nodded reluctantly. "Okay." She bit her bottom lip. "But you have to do what I say. Drink water, wake me when I tell you and eat every bite of that soup no matter how horrible it is."

"Agreed. I will eat your horrible soup. Is it ready?"

"Wait here. I'll check." Katniss bent down and kissed Peeta's forehead and walked down to the river. She kept looking around and glaring up at the trees as if cursing the Gamemakers for bringing up the feast. When she brought the soup back to Peeta he ate all of it and scraped out the pot.

"This is really good, Katniss. I didn't know you could cook." Gale chuckled to himself thinking Peeta was laying it on a bit thick. Catnip was a terrible cook. She could cook game, but that was about it.

"Take these," Katniss dropped some pills into Peeta's waiting palm. "I'll be right back. I'm going to go wash up."

"Be careful," he says as she walked out of the cave.

Gale watched Katniss as she sat on the edge of the riverbank. He knew she was thinking about going to the feast. When the silver parachute floated by Katniss' feet the crowd in the square screamed with excitement. Gale's first thought was Haymitch got Peeta's medication after all. Katniss wouldn't have to risk her life by going to the feast, but then he heard her screaming at her mentor and he knew she would be going after all. Haymitch made sure of it.

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"When do you think they'll do it?" Portia asked.

"We don't even know if the Gamemakers are planning anything," Cinna said.

"They're planning something. They might not call it a feast, but mark my words...they're figuring out a way to get all of those tributes together to battle it out." Haymitch worried over a cup of coffee laced with whiskey.

"Do you think she'll go?" Effie asked.

"Of course she will." Haymitch answered.

"No," Cinna said at the same time.

"What do you mean no?" Asked Haymitch. "You think she'll just stay put when the boy she loves is dying and she can save his life by getting some medication for him?"

"No. I think Katniss will want to go, but I don't think Peeta will let her," Cinna sat on the edge of the sofa. "He won't want her to put herself at risk for him."

"She won't listen," Haymitch waived him off. "She's too stubborn."

"She'll listen to Peeta," Portia said quietly. "If he asks her not to get his medication...she won't do it."

"Of course she will!" Haymitch was getting frustrated with the stylists. "That girl is a stubborn...hot headed, fool! She'll do whatever she has to if it means Peeta can live."

"She's also in love with him," Cinna stood up and walked to Haymitch.

"My point exactly," Haymitch said.

Cinna sighed. "If Peeta begs her not to...she won't do it."

"No one can tell that girl a thing," Haymitch argued.

"No one, but Peeta." Cinna tried to open Haymitch's eyes. "I don't know if you've been watching the same Games as we have, but..." Cinna put his hand on Haymitch's shoulder. "I'll admit Katniss will fight to get her own way. However, Peeta seems to be able to break through that tough shell of hers or haven't you noticed that yet? Do you really think if the boy she loves...who's dying...asks her not to risk her own life to save his, she'll tell him, no?"

Haymitch couldn't answer. The sound of the trumpets coming from the television screen had the four of them looking at one another. They knew the Gamemakers were about to make their next move.

"Attention Tributes! Attention! Commencing at sunrise, there'll be a feast tomorrow at the Cornucopia. This will be no ordinary occasion. Each of you needs something...desperately and we plan on being...generous hosts. Think hard about refusing to show up. For

some of you, this will be your last chance." Claudius Templesmith's voice rang through the District 12 suite.

"There it is," Haymitch looked at Effie. "You were right. They're working towards checkmate."

Effie sighed and listened as Katniss and Peeta began debating one another on TV. When they were through, Katniss walked to the river and the team from District 12 sat in different parts of their suite, hanging their heads.

"What's wrong with that boy?" Haymitch asked with sorrow in his voice. "Doesn't he know how hard it's going to be on her if he dies out there?"

"He loves her, Haymitch," Portia defended Peeta. "He'd rather die himself then let her risk her own life to save his."

"Well, I hope he's happy, because that's exactly what's going to happen." Haymitch stood up and pointed to the screen. "He's going to die."

"Oh, she has to go." Effie lifted her fingers to her lips. "She just has to."

"And you think she'll go back there and let him follow her to the Cornucopia?" Haymitch was getting frustrated with their entire group.

"It's before first light. Maybe she'll wait until he falls asleep and sneak out?" Effie hoped.

"Peeta will be watching her like a hawk," Portia said.

"Oh, I don't know." Effie said in frustration and fixed herself a cup of tea. She watched as Katniss washed out the pot she made the soup

in. "Maybe she can hit him over the head with that pot and knock him out and then go," she tried to lighten up the mood in the room. Portia gave her a halfhearted smile.

Haymitch's eyebrows shot up. "Knock him out?"

"Why?" Effie turned and said, "Do you think she'll do it?"

Haymitch started to laugh to himself as he walked out of the room saying, "As a matter of fact, I do."

"Where's he going?" Cinna asked.

"Who knows?" Portia shrugged and joined Effie at the bar for some tea. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Effie said as she handed Portia the cup of tea. "I wasn't sure if you wanted a little nip in it or not. I left it plain."

"Plain is perfect, Effie. Thanks," Portia sipped from the cup and watched as a silver parachute entered the arena. "What on earth?"

Effie's eyes lit up as she saw Katniss pick up the gift. "What did he send her?"

"I have no clue?" Cinna looked at the two women.

They all stared at Katniss who ripped open the package with excitement. The moment she took a sniff from the vial she faced the trees and said, "Sleep syrup? Seriously, Haymitch? What good is that going to..." Katniss stopped mid-sentence and frantically began gathering up some berries.

"Sleep syrup?" Effie asked. "Why would he send that in?"

Haymitch walked in the room and said, "You didn't really think she'd use a *pot* to knock him out did you?"

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Katniss sat at the edge of the river and weighed her options. If she waited until Peeta fell asleep she could always sneak out of the cave and head for the Cornucopia, but what if he woke up while she was gone? Would he actually drag himself out of the cave and try to follow her? Somehow she knew he would. The one thing she knew for certain was that she had to find a way to get to that feast if it killed her...and if she went, it probably would. Either way, Peeta would be dead. If she went and got killed at the Cornucopia, Peeta would die from blood poisoning. If she didn't go, Peeta would die from blood poisoning. But, if she went and got the medication there was a good chance that she and Peeta could win the Games and go home.

Katniss didn't notice the silver parachute until it floated by her. She jumped up, grabbed it and ripped open its contents. There was a tiny vial of something. My God, she thought. Did Haymitch actually get Peeta's medication? She opened it up and sniffed at it. The moment she did, she wanted to throw it in Haymitch's face. "Sleep syrup? Seriously, Haymitch? What good is that going to..." Sleep syrup. Katniss' eyes grew huge. She could use it to put Peeta to sleep. Haymitch had sent enough to knock Peeta out for at least a whole day. That would give her plenty of time to get to the feast and back without Peeta dragging himself behind her. She ran to Rue's berries and began crushing them inside of the clean pot. She poured the syrup in and mixed it around. Her heart was beating a mile a minute. She practically ran back to the cave, but stopped just before entering. What are you doing, Katniss? She asked herself. Do you think he's

going to forgive you for tricking him? For lying to him? She plastered her back to the outside of the cave wall. You made him a promise. You swore you wouldn't leave him. But all the promises in the world didn't matter to her. The only thing that mattered was saving Peeta's life.

She walked into the cave with a smile on her face, "Hey. Guess what I found?"

"What?" Peeta smiled back at her.

"Sugar berries." Katniss sat down and fed him a spoonful.

"They're sweet."

"My mother makes jam from them. Haven't you had them before?" Katniss continued feeding the tainted berries to Peeta.

"No," he shook his head. "They taste familiar though."

Katniss saw the bowl emptying out. Just a couple of more bites, she thought. "You can't get them in the market much. They only grow wild."

"They're sweet as syrup." Katniss shoved the last bite into Peeta's mouth. "Syrup?" Peeta's face got red with fury. He tried to spit the last bit out of his mouth, but Katniss held her hand over both his nose and mouth. Peeta's fingers tried to pull them away, but he was already losing consciousness.

"I'm sorry, Peeta," Katniss felt the tears burning the back of her eyes. "Please forgive me." But she could see in his eyes, that what she did was unforgivable. "You can't die." Peeta was falling asleep. Katniss cleaned a stray berry off of his chin and bent down to him. "I love you,"

her whisper was barely audible. Meant only for him and spoken to an unconscious Peeta.

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were Chapter 21: Thresh, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Twenty-One: Thresh

In this chapter Katniss goes to the feast. Haymitch meets a sponsor...and his wife and Katniss comes to some conclusions about why she let Peeta into her life. Thanks to all of you for the

great feedback and a big HOORAY for S and A for the beta! Next chapter...CAVE SCENE! Woot! But for now...

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

He tried to sleep. Gale tried to put thoughts of the day behind him, but watching Katniss secretly drug Peeta so she could go to the feast, put him on edge. The last time he looked at the television set she had been eating. He wondered what she was doing now that Peeta was asleep. Gale quietly made his way down the stairs and turned the television set on. Every tribute was on screen, except for the one Katniss called Foxface. Gale wondered why Catnip called her that at first, but the longer the Games went on, the more he understood it. The girl from District 5 was sly. Sly as a fox. If Katniss hadn't been a part of this year's Games, Gale thought, Foxface might actually stand a chance at winning.

Katniss was currently in the sleeping bag with Peeta, staring at the entrance of the cave. He wondered what she was thinking about. If he had even crossed her mind since the start of the Games. Gale was sure she had thought about him when she went hunting. They had done it together for years, so it'd be natural for Katniss to think of him while she was hunting alone. But she wasn't hunting, she was preparing for the feast. Waiting for the right time to make her way to the Cornucopia.

Gale had been furious earlier in the night when he realized what Katniss' intentions were. She had entered the Games to save her sister. She had promised Prim she would try and win, but going to the feast could be a death sentence for Katniss and Gale hated that she put Peeta's needs ahead of her own family. What would they do if she died in the arena? Was Gale supposed to take care of them for the rest of his life? Gale shook his head and thought; she'd take care of

yours if the roles were reversed. A few weeks ago a thought like that would've never entered his head, but he found himself resenting Katniss more and more lately. Once he figured out she had feelings for Peeta, Gale began dissecting her actions in the arena. Worse, he began taking apart their friendship and trying to figure out when the dynamics between her and the baker's son had changed.

Gale had always liked Katniss. Respected her and what she was willing to sacrifice for her family, but his own feelings of love had started months before the Games. Prim had come running to him after school. Katniss had gotten trapped in the elevator shaft at the mines after the yearly required trip. At first Gale had been worried for her safety. Their fathers had died in an explosion there, plus Katniss hated the mines. Hell, he hated the mines. Katniss had actually pretended to be sick in previous years to avoid the trip that the school had required. But then Gale began thinking about his life without her, if something happened to her while she was trapped...Gale found he didn't like what he was thinking. If he had lost Katniss, he found he'd be losing more than just a hunting partner...more than just a friend. By the time he and Prim had gotten to the scene, Katniss was out and walking towards home. Gale tried talking to her about it, but she seemed to be distracted. He knew being in the mines for so long had gotten the best of her. It was shortly after that he began to notice a slight change in her. Most people wouldn't pay attention to it, but Gale knew her well, and the slightest difference in her normally tough exterior was something he picked up on immediately. After that he began noticing things about her. Little things at first, like her smile. She had been treating him to more and more of them and Gale found that he liked it when Katniss let herself be happy. He had even considered talking to her about changing their relationship, but he never did for fear that she would back away from him. She liked to run away from deeply emotional things. She was a pro at blocking out personal contact with others. She never let anyone get too close to her. Gale guessed it had

something to do with her mother's catatonic state after her father died, but he never thought to ask Katniss about it. Well, he thought about it, but then he quickly let the thought go, out of fear of losing her friendship. Gale was just happy to have Catnip around, even if it was only in a platonic sense. Then one day he came upon her in the woods. He had tried to find her in school that afternoon, but she didn't show up for the last half of her school day. Gale took his chances, checked the forbidden forest and was pleased when he came upon her. She was sitting next to a bush and staring off into the sky. She was deep in thought as Gale sat next to her. When Catnip turned and faced him, he noticed a soft expression on her face. When he asked her what she was thinking about she told him she was thinking about her future and how her life looked a lot more promising than what she had thought. That was a week before the reaping. Gale couldn't help but wonder if it was Peeta who occupied Catnip's mind that day and if she still thought her future looked promising.

He sat on the floor in front of the TV and stared at her. Katniss looked so alone. For the first time since finding out about Katniss and Peeta's relationship, Gale found himself empathizing with Katniss. He knew how it felt to sit idly by and not be able to help the person you loved. But she would be, Gale thought. She'd be putting her life on the line any minute now to save Peeta's.

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Katniss crawled into the cave from an opening she had left when disguising its entrance with rocks. She took care of necessities. Dinner, water, hiding Peeta...now all she had to do was wait.

The sky was getting darker. The cave colder. She was certain the Gamemakers were causing drastic temperature changes in the arena

to mess with the tributes. It was their job, after all. Katniss crawled into the sleeping bag, next to Peeta, and tried to stay warm. Once again there would be no sleep tonight. She was grateful Peeta let her get some extra sleep earlier in the day.

Though she occasionally looked down at Peeta while he was asleep, she had a hard time facing him even in his unconscious state. She kept seeing his eyes, the pain in them, when he figured out she had fed him sleep syrup. Would he forgive her for betraying him? Would he have the chance or would they both die as a result of the Games? Katniss tried to put thoughts of their death to the back of her mind.

As the night wore on, her nerves became steel. She would not let Peeta die. She had to save his life. He had, she told herself, saved hers on more than one occasion, saved her from so many things throughout her life. Katniss wondered how many times Peeta had altered the course of her life without her knowledge.

She thought of the first time he saved her. They were eleven and Peeta had thrown her some bread. Katniss knew his mother had told him to feed the bread to the pigs, she heard the witch screaming it at him. Saw her hit Peeta on the side of his head while they were standing outside by their pigpen. But Peeta waited until his mother went into the bakery and threw the bread to Katniss instead. You saved my life...my whole family that day, Peeta. Do you know that? She looked down at him and took his lifeless hand in her own, under the cover of the sleeping bag. It happened years earlier, but Katniss never mentioned it to Peeta. Even after they started seeing one another, she was never sure how to bring it up. She always wondered what was going through his head before doing that. What he had been thinking. Had he done it on purpose or was it simply good timing? No, she thought, it was intentional. He knew what he was doing when he burnt that bread. He had seen you in the rain, Katniss. He saw you

looking through the trash cans searching for food, she told herself. He burnt that bread and took a beating from his mother just to feed you. You had been at the end of your rope...sure you were going to die of starvation and then...Katniss closed her eyes, forcing the tears that were threatening to fall, back. Peeta, you have no idea how you changed the course of my life that day. She pulled his hand out from the sleeping bag and kissed his fingers then put it back inside to keep it warm. She silently vowed that she would thank him if she made it back from the feast.

And what about the letter to Mrs. Beasterson? She wondered? Would she have been transferred into a different class? Would the Beast have reacted differently had no letter been turned in? Katniss remembered when the teacher walked up to her and dropped the letter Peeta had written on her behalf, on her desk. The teacher gave her a little smirk and asked Katniss if she would be sleeping in class again or if Katniss would be joining them for their assignment. Katniss had been tempted not to go to class that day, since the Beast told her not to bother showing up without a letter, but Katniss was stubborn and feeling grouchy and would've gladly taken the crusty teacher on. When Katniss read the letter she had no clue where it had come from. She wanted to tell her teacher she hadn't written it, but then she read it again and wished she *had* written the thing. It made Katniss laugh. The Beast seemed to appreciate the fact that Katniss turned something in. But it hadn't been Katniss...or Gale. Once again, Peeta came to her rescue. Gale. Katniss was so sure it had been him that covered her behind in school. He did it so often in the woods. The thought of having someone else looking out for her, other than Gale, would've shocked her at the time. She asked Gale about the letter. She even showed it to him and he never once said he didn't write the thing. Katniss found that she was irked with Gale for taking credit for something Peeta did, then again, she thought, Gale never actually came out and said it was him.

Gale loved her. Peeta kept saying this to her. Even Prim told her that Gale had feelings for her, but Katniss found it hard to believe. She had never thought of Gale in that way. Even now, thinking that Gale might love her, Katniss still couldn't muster up those types of feelings for him. That's because you're in love with someone else, she told herself.

She squeezed Peeta's unresponsive hand and remembered the first time he had touched her this way. He had saved her that day too. Saved her from having a nervous breakdown in the elevator at the mines. For the first time, since Peeta took her hand in the elevator shaft, Katniss felt that morbid feeling inside herself. The one that consumed her after her father's death. It changed her. She often wondered, if her mother had done what Hazelle had done, if she had gotten a job and put food on the table for them, would she have turned out to be such a hard person? So distant from everyone? Everyone, but Peeta, Katniss thought to herself.

There had been many times over the past few months she had questioned why she allowed Peeta to get close to her. Why she let him take her hand. In the elevator shaft, she had felt vulnerable, a thing that never sat well with Katniss. When he took her hand in his, her normal instinct would've been to pull away, but he had told her about his feelings for her. How he had felt that way since the first day of school and Katniss was in awe. She had no clue that anyone could see her that way, so when he took her hand in his, she didn't pull it away. Not at first. Eventually she had let it go, but the moment she did something happened. She felt a loss. Her hand, which was normally empty, had actually felt that way. It felt as though something was missing. In the span of minutes, she and Peeta had gone from acquaintances to so much more. Katniss took hold of Peeta's hand again while in the elevator and that's when she felt it. Security. Something that had been missing since her father had died. Peeta

made her feel safe. He made her feel protected. Katniss closed her eyes and said to herself, you just made me *feel again*, Peeta. It was crazy. She was crazy. She was certain of it. He had gotten her to open up about her love of the woods that day. Relaxed her in a way that she had never felt before. So when he asked her to meet him for lunch, Katniss said, yes. The first day she met him for lunch she was tempted to tell him they could be nothing more than friends, but he didn't push her. He didn't even hold her hand that day and by the time lunch was through Katniss found herself longing for the feeling of his fingers intertwined with hers. As time went on, they grew closer. Shared things, things she would only share with Gale. Some of the things she told Peeta, she never spoke aloud, but he had made her feel so comfortable and at ease. With each touch, each hug, each kiss against her cheek, Katniss found herself more and more drawn to him. Then one day she realized how different she was when in his presence. Katniss didn't feel the need to defend everything she did. She didn't have to worry about feeding her family, breaking the laws of the Capitol or trying to shield herself from others. Each day she and Peeta met for lunch, she was able to surrender to him. In his soft spoken, gentle way Peeta had let her give up control for a little while and Katniss could be a normal girl. There were times when Katniss felt her defenses go on the rise, but only when Peeta would show up with a new mark from his mother. Other than that, he allowed her a form of freedom that the woods...her family...Gale could never provide. Not only had Peeta *saved* her life, he had *given* her a life. Peeta had saved her from herself.

Katniss knew it was time to leave. Time to face the other tributes at the feast. She leaned over Peeta and whispered, "You saved my life. Now I'm going to save yours." She pressed her lips against his unresponsive ones and whispered in his ear so no one else could hear, "I'm not afraid of you anymore, Peeta. I love you." She wiped away the tears; she didn't know had formed, from her eyes and stood

up next to his sleeping figure. She grabbed her bow and arrows, gave them a pat and took a deep breath. She felt a fire in her belly and determination coursing through her veins. She walked through the woods towards the Cornucopia and flared her nostrils as she thought, I'm coming Cato and I'm ready for you.

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"Portia, are you sure about this?" Cinna asked her quietly while rubbing a hand up her arm.

"Yes." Portia straightened out her blouse and said, "We're going to that party and providing a united front for Katniss and Peeta. We're not going to let the people of the Capitol think we're afraid, because we're *not*. Katniss is going to get that medicine and she's going to bring it back to Peeta and then they're going to win this thing." Portia started to walk to the door of their suite and turned to Cinna. "Let's go."

Up until a few minutes before Portia had no desire to go to the party and face Katniss' possible death. Portia was certain that if the Careers got a hold of Katniss, her death would be slow and torturous. Then she saw the look on Katniss' face and thought if she isn't afraid to face the danger at the Cornucopia, I won't be afraid to face it with her.

As Portia and Cinna walked into the event, Haymitch and Effie smiled at them.

"Didn't think you were coming?" Haymitch said to the stylists.

"We're a team," Portia held her head high. "All of us. We all need to be here to support Katniss."

Haymitch gave his head a nod and said, "It'll be a couple of hours yet. If she makes it out of there..."

"*When*," Effie interrupted him. "When she makes it out of there."

Haymitch had an approving look on his face. "When she makes it out of there, they're going to need sponsors. Between the broth and the sleep syrup, we're running low on funds. No one is going to commit to anything until the feast is over, but we can get a feel for the crowd. See who's rooting for Katniss."

"What say, we mingle?" Effie suggested. "Haymitch, why don't we go join that group over there?" Effie gestured with her head. "I think you'll be *very* interested in meeting a couple of them."

"Effie, there's no way that guy is going to sponsor Katniss and Peeta. He's a Career lover." Haymitch grumbled.

"I wouldn't be so certain of that. Marriage can change a man." Effie grinned and walked Haymitch towards the group of sponsors and tapped Quillan on the shoulder. "Quillan dear, I'd like you to meet Haymitch Abernathy. Victor of the Second Quarter Quell in which there were *twice* as many tributes to defeat." Effie Turned to Haymitch and said, " Haymitch this is a dear friend of mine as well as *theman* responsible for Finnick Odair's trident, Quillan Vulgaris."

"Now...now, Effie. I wasn't the only one that sponsored Finnick that year," chuckled the sponsor. The man stuck out his hand and gave Haymitch's a shake. "You've got yourself a hell of a girl this year, Haymitch."

"I've got me a hell of a girl *and* boy," Haymitch smiled.

"Oh and this is Quillan's wife," Effie held her hand out to a woman and then to Haymitch. "Iola. Iola Primrose Vulgaris, I'd like you to meet Haymitch Abernathy."

"Iola...*Primrose*?" Haymitch's eyebrows shot up as he shook the woman's hand. "What a lovely name."

"I know. Can you believe someone from your district actually thought to use such an eloquent name as mine?" Iola gushed to Haymitch. "Quillan and I have just been drawn to your tributes this year from the moment Katniss volunteered for her sister. I keep telling Quill it's a sign from above." The woman and her husband laughed. Effie and Haymitch joined in as they gave each other calculating looks. "And Peeta...oh, I just adore him. I truly hope he doesn't die. We've got a bet with a few people that Katniss is going to save his life and I hate losing bets." Effie excused herself from their conversation claiming Cinna was calling her over, but Effie couldn't stand to listen to the pair any longer. She wondered how she had ever thought behavior like that was acceptable. Effie stopped walking and glanced back at the woman and shuddered with the realization that not only was her behavior acceptable, it was considered normal and up until a couple of weeks ago, it was Effie's own behavior as well.

"What do you think, Haymitch? Guess you're worried about your girl with Cato, Clove *and* Thresh coming after her?" Quillan asked.

"I think Cato, Clove and Thresh are the ones that need to worry. Katniss has this in the bag." Haymitch was terrified for Katniss, but if anyone could make it in and out of a feast, he was sure it was going to be Katniss.

"If she does make it out...stop by and see us. We'll talk," Quillan shook Haymitch's hand and bid him farewell.

The team from District 12 roamed around the party, nursing drinks and picking up on any conversations pertaining to Katniss and Peeta. Effie made a mental note of the sponsors that were cheering them on as they waited for the feast to start.

"It's starting," Cinna said without thinking as he watched a table appear from beneath the ground in front of the Cornucopia.

The cameras were on all of the tributes, but Peeta. Katniss waited in the trees as did Clove on the opposite side of the Cornucopia. Foxface was hiding in a dark space. The area she chose was almost pitch black and none of them had a clue where the girl was. Cato was sneaking through the woods in search of Thresh who was standing at the edge of the tall grass.

There was a hush amongst the crowd at the Capitol and then, out of nowhere, Foxface jumped out of her hiding place. The center of the Cornucopia.

There were mixed reactions throughout the crowd.

"Hah! I told you she'd be the first to get it! Pay up!"

"Wouldn't surprise me if District 5 brought home a victory this year."

"Why didn't Katniss think of that?"

Haymitch glared at the tribute from District 5, who was darting for the trees with her backpack, thinking, that girl is too damn smart for her own good. "Make your move, sweetheart," he spoke under his breath to Katniss.

Portia stood at the edge of a table and clasped her hands tightly together. "You can do this, Katniss. For Peeta," she whispered.

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There was a huge crowd in the square of District 12. Gale looked around and noticed several people he and Katniss had sold to in the past. He was surprised to see so many Peacekeepers there cheering her on. Ultimately they worked for the Capitol, so he wasn't sure why they were so invested in Catnip. Perhaps they were simply going along with the crowd, he thought. Or maybe they were worried they'd lose a steady source of food. Goodness knows they didn't actually care about her wellbeing.

"Gale."

Gale turned when he heard his name and saw Greasy Sae. "I didn't expect to see you here," Gale told the woman.

"Came to show my support for Katniss." Sae said.

"She's going to need it with those Careers and that boy from Eleven."

Sae nodded her head and said, "I'm sure she'll make it out of there. Ain't nothing can stand in that girl's way once she puts her mind to it."

Gale lifted up the corner of his mouth in a grin and said, "You're right about that."

The mood throughout the square was one of excitement. The betting was getting hot, but Katniss' odds with the bookies weren't good. Gale wanted to go to the area where the degenerates were, that were in charge of it, and give them a piece of his mind, but the truth was he wasn't sure if the odds were in her favor at the feast. There were two Careers and a monster from District 11 battling against her for the

items the Capitol were putting before them. Surely the first person to reach the items would snatch everyone's belongings. Katniss probably wouldn't do that, he thought. She wouldn't put a larger target on her back.

The sight of the table rising from beneath the earth brought a roar from the crowd around Gale. He felt his heart quickening when he saw the backpacks and wondered who would be the first tribute to make their move. Gale jumped when he felt a hand touch his shoulder. Darius, the Peacekeeper was standing to his side. The man gave Gale a nod and turned to the screen. Gale ignored him at first, he wasn't sure what to do since Peacekeepers normally don't socialize with residents of the district in public. Then he stared at the large television screen and watched as Foxface popped out from inside of the Cornucopia and snatched her backpack. She ran into the woods with it and everyone from District 12 began voicing their complaints. Gale let out a bit of a frustrated huff and continued to watch, but his eyes weren't focused on Katniss, they were locked on another tribute. "Oh no," Gale whispered as he watched the tribute run for the Cornucopia.

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Katniss stood on the outskirts of the Cornucopia waiting for the sun to rise. She knew she'd have to be the first one to the feast or someone would take her package with Peeta's medication. As she stood there she wondered if the Careers would wait for her to make her move and try to attack or if Thresh would try to get to the items first.

As the sun rose, she stood back and stared at the Cornucopia waiting...waiting. Where was it? She wondered. The Gamemakers promised a feast and nothing was showing up. Suddenly the ground

split and a table appeared with four backpacks on it, each one with a district number marking it. Katniss could make out all of the district numbers from her hiding spot except hers, she was certain the tiniest pack had to be Peeta's medication. Just as she was getting ready to make a run for it Foxface dashed out of the Cornucopia and grabbed the pack marked Five. Katniss stepped back and shook her head out of disbelief. Foxface was more of a threat than she had expected. Katniss took a second to consider shooting her from her spot, but if she had, she'd give up her position and that wasn't an option. She took a breath, got ready to run and saw Thresh heading for the packs. No! Katniss' mind screamed. Clove came running out of the trees and threw a knife at him as he grabbed the remainder of the packs. Thresh had no clue the knife was heading for his head. Without thinking, Katniss ran from her hiding spot and screamed, "Watch out, Thresh!" Rue had spoken so highly of Thresh during their alliance. Rue knew him from District 11. He was a good worker. Took care of his family and, Rue had said, protected her from a Peacekeeper once. She had dropped a basket of fruit and caused them to bruise. Thresh had taken a whipping from the Peacekeepers for Rue, claiming that he was the one that had dropped the basket of fruit to the ground. Katniss had never known a Peacekeeper to whip someone for such a minor thing as that, but she had to respect Thresh for taking the blame, knowing what the outcome would be. A whipping could've killed someone as tiny as Rue. Thresh had even turned the Careers down when they asked him to join their alliance. Rue had told Katniss that he stared at them and said, no. They continued to ask him during training, but he ignored them until the Careers had finally given up. Yes, Katniss had a great deal of respect for the large boy that the Capitol pitted against her as her enemy.

"Duck!" Katniss screamed out another warning to the male tribute from District 11. She saved Thresh from the Career's deadly knife. Thresh

turned his head just in the nick of time. The blade whisked by his ear, barely missing him.

Katniss and Clove ran full throttle towards the Cornucopia. Their feet were pounding the terrain and their arms pumping in time. Katniss was determined to get Peeta's medication and Clove was unwavering in her resolution to get Katniss. Katniss reached behind her and took an arrow out of her sheath. She loaded it into her bow and shot it at Clove just as the girl threw a knife at Katniss' head. Katniss twisted herself to the side causing the blade to graze her forehead which resulted in a gash above her eye. She felt the blade ripping through her flesh and the sting of the blood dripping into her eye. Though Katniss aimed her arrow for Clove's heart, the girl moved too quickly and Katniss missed the deadly shot, causing a puncture in her left arm instead. Katniss saw Clove reach up and pull the arrow from her arm and toss it to the ground without blinking an eye. Katniss' heart was racing as she bolted towards Thresh who was now headed back to his field with all three backpacks. Katniss raced towards the large boy with the intention of getting Peeta's medication, but Clove jumped on her and dragged her across the ground, preventing her from her destination. They rolled around the grass, their grunts and cries echoing through the arena. Katniss battled Clove's strong arms, but she was no match for the Career.

Though Katniss struggled and fought valiantly, Clove pinned down her arms with her knees and began tormenting her with an evil look on her face. "What's wrong, girl on fire? Lost your boyfriend's medication?"

"He doesn't need it!" Katniss spat out. "He's out there right now, hunting Cato. Peeta!" Katniss wasn't expecting a fist to her throat and she began choking when she got one. The burning pain caused tears to form in her eyes.

"Liar! We know he's almost dead! And so are you! We're going to kill you like we did your little friend Rue!"

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Haymitch couldn't believe his eyes. "What the hell?!" He screamed when he heard Katniss' warning cries to Thresh.

"My God! What is she thinking?" Effie dropped to her seat.

Haymitch watched as Katniss struggled with the female tribute from District 2. The Career had Katniss pinned to the ground.

"Haymitch, look!" Effie pointed to the screen. "Look!" Thresh stopped running to the field and turned around.

"What the hell is going on?" Haymitch's jaw dropped as he watched the boy from Eleven make his way back to Katniss' screams, the backpacks marked District 2, 11 and 12 were hanging from his hand.

"We're going to kill you like we did your little friend Rue!" Clove yelled at Katniss with evil dripping from her voice.

"Don't say her name! You don't have the right to say her name!" Katniss fought with Clove to no avail.

"Aw, too bad," Clove said in a taunting tone. "Rue died and now you're going to die and I think we'll just let nature take care of Lover boy. What do you think about that?" Katniss answered by spitting in the girl's face. Clove gave her a menacing sneer and wiped the spit off with the back of her hand. "Where should we start?" She dragged the tip of the knife around Katniss' face. "Hmmm...how about your lips? You won't need those anymore."

"Geez!" Haymitch swallowed the lump in his throat. "That boy is going in!"

Effie jumped up from her chair and grabbed hold of Portia who had a look of shock on her face. "Oh my! Oh my!"

Portia gripped Effie's arm just as Thresh pulled Clove off of Katniss and lifted her into midair by the throat.

"What did you say about Rue? Did you kill her? Did you kill that little girl?" Thresh accosted Clove.

"No!" Clove answered with terror in her voice. "It wasn't me!"

"Don't lie to me, Two! I heard you say her name!" Clove's feet were dangling a foot in the air. "You kill her like you were going to kill this little girl here?!" Thresh screamed. "You kill that little girl?!" He took Clove, squeezed her neck and slammed her head into the metal surface of the Cornucopia with such force, the viewing audience could hear her skull crack.

Katniss began crawling backwards on her hands and knees as Thresh threw Clove's body to the ground. There was panic in her eyes. "I wasn't aiming my arrow at you Thresh. I was...was trying to kill her." She began stammering.

Thresh slowly walked towards Katniss like a lion stalking his prey. "Why'd you save me, fire girl?"

"Because...because Rue said you helped her...you saved her once...with the basket of fruit." Katniss voice was shaking.

"Rue told you that?" Thresh asked. He had almost reached Katniss.

"Yes. We were allies. The boy from One killed her and I killed him. I shot him with an arrow. Then I sang to Rue until she fell asleep."

"Fell asleep?"

"She...died." Katniss explained. "And...and your district sent me some bread and...and..." Katniss wiped her nose. "Make it quick will you Thresh? Don't torture me. My little sister is watching and..." The tiny backpack marked Twelve landed on Katniss' lap causing Katniss to stop speaking.

"That's for *my* life." Thresh began walking backwards away from Katniss. The sound of the cannon echoed through the arena, marking Clove's death.

"Clove!" Cato's voice was calling out from the distance. "Clove!"

"Wha..." Katniss appeared to be in shock. "What?"

"You saved my life. I save yours." Thresh looked towards Cato's voice. "This one's for Rue." Thresh pointed towards Cato. "No more after that, fire girl. We're even." Katniss appeared to be frozen in place. "You better run now." Thresh warned her. "He'll come for *me*...not you." Thresh lifted up the backpack marked Two. "Now go." Katniss didn't move. "Go!" He screamed. "Run!"

No one at the Capitol's party could believe what they were seeing. Least of all, the team from District 12. Katniss picked up the tiny pack marked Twelve, wiped the blood flowing from her forehead with her sleeve and ran for the woods.

Thresh ran to the edge of the tall grass and stood waiting.

The crowd of viewers at the Capitol's party started screaming out in disbelief.

"What's he doing?!"

"Run you idiot!"

"Cato's going to kill you!"

Haymitch looked around the room until his eyes met with the mentors from District 11. Seeder, the female mentor, gave him one nod and turned her head to the television screen. Haymitch watched as Thresh got ready to run. Thresh waited until Cato saw him with the backpacks then took off into the field.

"Clove!" Cato screamed and ran to the girl's dead body. He dropped her lifeless figure to the ground, let out a scream of aggravation and ran after Thresh who had hurriedly disappeared into the tall grass and headed for his den.

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Gale, Darius and Greasy Sae stood watching as Thresh saved Katniss' life. Gale shook his head, "What just happened? Did...did..."

Greasy Sae clasped her hand against Gale's shoulder and said, "She saved that boy's life. She's saving Peeta's life."

All feelings of remorse for Katniss and Peeta had vanished from Gale. In its place was excitement for what was playing out on the screen in front of him. Katniss was running like a maniac through the woods, towards the cave, where Peeta was still asleep. The giant television screen in the square split the image and was now focused on Katniss

as well as Thresh and Cato. Thresh was running towards his hideout and Cato was attempting to follow him, but he had lost his trail and was throwing a fit in the middle of the grassy field. Screaming out obscenities at the tribute from District 11. Katniss kept on running and pressing down against her bloody head. She reached the river and jumped into it without stopping. She pulled off the extra pair of socks she had been wearing on her hands for warmth and pressed them against her wound in an attempt to stop her bleeding, but the socks began dripping with blood after a few minutes.

"She's bleeding too much," Gale said.

"Head wounds bleed a lot," Greasy Sae said as if trying to appease him.

"She'll be lucky if she makes it back to the cave." Gale worried.

"Luck's on her side, Gale!" Darius said. "Luck and the support of the nation!" Gale looked at Darius whose face was lit up with excitement.

Gale found himself drawn to Darius' enthusiasm. "She's going to make it." He said. "She'll make it!"

"Damn right she will!" Sae said.

Katniss began running through the river towards the cave. The water was splashing up behind her with every step she took. She was a few yards away from it as she called out, "I'm coming, Peeta! I'm coming!"

Gale could tell she was running on sheer adrenaline.

Katniss squeezed between the stones she used to block the cave's entrance and ripped open the backpack with Peeta's medicine. She dumped the contents onto the ground and tore open the box. Gale

held his breath as she pulled out the syringe and plunged it into Peeta's arm with shaky fingers. The moment she administered the medication the entire population of District 12 roared with approval. Cheers and hoots were being hollered out as Katniss collapsed to the ground and lost consciousness.

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Katniss had no clue what had come over her. It was as though something inside of her took over and needed to warn Thresh about Clove's attempt on his life. As she ran back to the cave she kept telling herself not to stop. There was still a chance that Cato could be following her, but Thresh had assured her he'd lure Cato away from her. Why? For Rue, he had said. It was a debt to be paid. But still... She couldn't believe it. These were the Games. Surely Thresh wanted to live so why put himself in harm's way to save the life of another tribute. Especially one from another district. You could ask yourself the same thing, Katniss, she said to herself. She began beating herself up for her actions at the Cornucopia. What will happen if Thresh kills Cato? Then you'll be stuck having to kill Thresh. You should've let Clove kill him. You could've shot her with an arrow while she was running towards him and they'd both be dead. Stupid, Katniss. Stupid. But Rue, she thought. He had saved Rue from the Peacekeepers. He had taken a beating for Rue. Still... She could feel her lungs burning as she ran through the woods. Her head was bleeding so much it began getting in the way of her vision. She lifted her sleeve to it and pressed against the cut. Thresh killed Clove for you. He saved your life. You saved his, she told herself. What were you thinking? She continued berating herself as her feet pummeled the ground. Now what? If he kills Cato you and Peeta will have to figure out a way to kill him, then how will you feel? How will you live with his blood on your

hands? She tried to push the thoughts out of her head as she ran towards the river. She could hear the water in the distance. She pushed her feet to move faster, gripping the tiny backpack in her hand. She ran into the water and ripped the spare pair of socks she had been using as gloves off of her hands and pressed them to her forehead. There was no staunching the blood flow though. She applied pressure to it as she ran to the cave. She could see it up ahead. She didn't realize it when she screamed out to Peeta. "I'm coming, Peeta! I'm coming!" She forced herself into the opening at the cave's entrance and frantically worked at removing Peeta's medication from its confines. She could feel the needle as it entered the skin of his arm and slowly pushed the plunger down releasing the medicine into his system. The second all of it was administered the walls of the cave seemed to start spinning. The last thing she remembered was the blood dripping off of her hands after she had removed them from her injured head.

74th Hunger Games

Challenge: We

Always Were Chapter

22: Love Conquers

All, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Twenty-Two: Love Conquers All

It's long. It's fluffy. It's here! Thank you to everyone that has taken the time to leave feedback. I have some very creative reviews! They blow me away! And to S and A... you people have no idea how much work it takes to go through one of these long chapters and rip it apart. Thank you S and A for taking your time and doing it for me. Now it's time for the long awaited cave scene...

74th Hunger Games Challenge!

He slowly blinked, taking in his surroundings. He felt something pinching his arm. Peeta looked down and saw a needle sticking out of him. He yanked it out and stared at it for a second trying to remember what had happened. Then he saw the drops of blood on his arm. His eyes opened wide as he took in the scene before him. Katniss was sprawled out on the cave floor next to him lying in a pool of blood.

Peeta rolled to his side, without thinking about his injured leg and made his way to her. "Katniss! Katniss!" He shook her limp frame. "Wake up! Katniss!" Blood began spilling out of the gash in her head

as tears fell from Peeta's eyes. "No. No, Katniss," his screams became sobs. He pressed his palm to the slit in her forehead and leaned his ear against her chest to check for signs of life. He heard her heart beating steadily and closed his eyes tightly. She was unconscious, bleeding and in desperate need of care. "You weren't supposed to go," he choked out. The tears were falling freely against her body. Peeta could feel the palm of his hand becoming slick with her blood. He lifted his head from her chest and looked around for the backpack containing the first aid kit. "Okay...okay..." He knew he had to focus on the problem at hand. "Let's get you cleaned up," he spoke to himself in order to calm his nerves.

He tried to stand, and found he was able to by bracing himself against the wall. He wondered how long he had been asleep...how long Katniss had been lying in a pool of her own blood? He shook his head and tried to clear his mind. His main concern needed to be Katniss. He tore through the backpack and found the plastic sheet and slid it underneath her, threw the sleeping bag towards the higher end of the cave and began cleaning Katniss' injury. One half of her face was covered in dried blood as well as part of her neck. Peeta sat next to her and began pouring water slowly over her injured area to address exactly what was damaged. There were only a handful of bandages left, so he needed to be frugal with them. He remembered the ones Katniss used as compresses for his fever and he used those to clean away the blood that had dried at her hairline. He dipped the bandages in a pot he filled with water and began washing it all away, but it was apparent that he needed to stop the flow of it, before cleaning it. He took a fresh bandage and pressed it against the gash in her head and secured it in place. "What were you thinking, Katniss?"

His nose was running. There was no controlling his tears. When her wound was dressed he cleaned the rest of the blood off of her and began stripping the clothes off of her upper body. Fortunately the only

thing that needed cleaning was the jacket. The edges of the sleeves looked black from the dried blood that was on it. Peeta began searching her arms for injuries, thinking she might have more of them, until he realized she probably tried to staunch the blood flow with her hands. Just in case, he did a cursory search of the remainder of her body. Her pants were wet as were her feet. He stripped her of her boots and socks and removed her pants. He wrapped his jacket around the lower half of her body to keep her warm.

He pulled himself up and made his way to the sleeping bag and laid it out. He slid Katniss across the cave floor by the plastic sheet and hauled her into the bag. Once she was nestled in he leaned against the cave wall and felt himself shiver from the coolness of the stones against his back. Their home was a mess. Bloody bandages strewn about. A pot full of red water. A used syringe lying next to a puddle of Katniss' blood. A tiny pack with the number twelve on it and an empty box with its lid thrown about three feet away. Not to mention Katniss' blood soaked clothes. Peeta knew he'd have to clean them.

He looked at the cave entrance and wondered how he would be able to get out of it. Katniss had blocked the entire thing with rocks. He noticed an opening, but he didn't think he could make it through. They didn't need any animals coming after them. They were already being hunted down by tributes. He'd have no choice but to try and make it out of the cave and down to the river. Besides, they would need more water. Peeta took a deep breath and braced his hands against the wall to lift himself up. He still hadn't looked at his leg, but he knew it must've gotten better or he wouldn't have been able to put pressure on it. He bent over and picked up Katniss' jacket. Peeta grabbed the bloody bandages, dirty pot and water containers and shoved them into the backpack. He strapped it onto his back and made his way to the opening of the cave.

It was dark outside. The moon hadn't quite risen and the sun had set. If Peeta hurried, he could make it to the river, take care of necessities and get back to Katniss within an hour. The only problem was walking. So far he was able to do it with the aid of the cave wall. He had no clue how he'd make it on his own. As he peered out the opening of the cave he realized there was no way he'd be able to make it to the river on his own. He'd have to rinse off the sleeves of Katniss' clothing with the water from their supply and keep the bloody bandages hidden in the backpack until he felt better. He rinsed out the sleeves of her jacket over the puddle of blood and squeezed them out. He was grateful when the water thinned out Katniss' blood and turned it from thick and dark to a thin pink puddle. He lifted the bottle of water and drank what was left of it. Come morning, he'd have no choice but to make a trip to the river.

He did his best to clean up their hideout then felt something in his stomach. A rumbling. Peeta was hungry. He hadn't been hungry for...he stopped to think. He couldn't remember the last time he felt the need for food. He opened the backpack and found their supply of food and began devouring a piece of groosling. After his first piece, he reached for another and ate that, then another until he realized that the food might have to last them awhile. As much as he wanted to eat all of it, he stopped and put the fourth piece back inside of the pack.

He wiped his greasy hands on his pant leg and scooted himself to the opening of the cave to wait for the nightly anthem. When it played it was followed up with the image of Clove. Peeta couldn't believe his eyes when he saw her in the sky. That's when he knew Katniss' injury had been a result of one of Clove's knives. He wondered if Clove had died as a result of Katniss' bow and arrow. To his surprise, he found himself feeling sorry for the tribute from District 2. She was just a young girl. She never had a chance at living a normal life. Her entire existence had been to train for the Games. *These Games* and she

had lost. Peeta looked across the cave at Katniss' sleeping figure and made his way over to her. He found her knife and began to get himself situated inside of the sleeping bag next to her to keep her warm. "One more down, Katniss," he spoke softly to her. "Three more to go and then we go home."

Just as he was about to put his arm around her, he heard the clap of thunder. Peeta looked up at the roof of the cave and said, "Are you serious?" To no one in particular. The rain started immediately after. He blew out a breath and resigned himself to the Gamemakers latest twist in the Games. "Fine!" He smacked the ground next to him out of frustration. "That's just fine!" He yelled out to them. "Bring it on!" He pulled himself up and out of the sleeping bag. "We can take it!" He was furious with the situation the Gamemakers had put him and Katniss in. Put all of the tributes in. He snatched the plastic sheet off of the ground and began fashioning a shelter over the sleeping Katniss with it. "Got anything else for us?" He spoke with disgust to the cave's ceiling. He was answered with a clap of thunder and a flash of lightening. Peeta moved Katniss' clothing to an area of the cave that appeared to be free of leaks, so they could dry, then lay next to Katniss in the sleeping bag. He held her close with one arm and gripped the knife in his free hand. "I am *not* in the mood for this crap," he said under his breath as he listened to the sound of the rain hitting the rocks that surrounded them. In that moment, he wished Cato would walk in to their cave...he wished all three of the remaining tributes would walk in to their cave so he could put an end to the Games once and for all.

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"It's just like them to dry up his source of water and then turn around and flood him out." Portia said as she sketched a pair of pants for Peeta.

"These are the Games," Cinna briefly looked up at the television screen to see Katniss and Peeta taking up half of the screen and Thresh and Cato the other. "The Gamemakers like to keep things interesting."

"But making Thresh put his life on the line for some water just to turn around and cause it to rain..." Portia shook her head. "That's not right."

"This whole event isn't right, Portia." Cinna glanced over at Portia's sketch and looked at his own.

Portia fluttered her overly long gold eyelashes and said, "Good point."

"We're off to the party," announced Effie.

"Are you sure you don't need us?" Portia asked Haymitch.

"No. You two stay here and keep an eye on things," he gestured to the television set. "Thresh is going to have to leave that hideout and when he does, Cato is going to be on his tail. Those two are going to be battling it out within the next twenty-four hours. Come to the party if Cato finds Thresh or if Katniss wakes up. Effie and I will be too busy to be watching television."

"Sounds like a plan," Cinna said.

"Let's go," Haymitch guided Effie to the door.

"I think you need to talk to Quillan and his wife again. She's fixated on the fact that she and Katniss' sister share a name." Effie informed Haymitch.

"Yeah, I got that yesterday." Haymitch rolled his eyes as they headed down the hall. "How'd you know they'd be willing to sponsor us?"

"They're shallow people, Haymitch. That woman probably thinks the Everdeens named Katniss' sister after her."

Haymitch chuckled. "Got any other leads out there?"

"A few," Effie told him. "But I think I'll have to mingle from guest to guest and get an idea of who's emotionally involved in Katniss and Peeta."

"Right now, they're all involved in them, Effie. None of them thought Katniss would get out of that feast alive and when that kid from Eleven saved her life..." Haymitch shook his head in disbelief. "Trust me...that's all anyone will be talking about."

"That's what concerns me. How do we know they won't want to sponsor that boy instead of our kids?" Haymitch lifted the corner of his mouth in a grin at Effie's use of the word, kids.

"They won't. They'll want to sponsor Katniss and Peeta. Now that Peeta's moving around...taking care of her...they'll want to make sure those two have their happily ever after." Haymitch pushed the button for the elevator.

"Then we better go find those two a bunch of fairy godmothers." Effie smiled.

Haymitch twisted his face and gave Effie a strange look. "What the hell is a fairy godmother?"

Effie shook her head and said, "Seriously, Haymitch. Had you never read a book as a child?"

"Sorry...I was too busy fighting for my life." Haymitch stepped into the elevator with Effie. "I'm not sure how long this rain is going to last, but Katniss' needs the time to heal and so does Peeta. Neither on of them are up to a fight right now."

"Yes." Effie nodded. "Any ideas?"

"I think the Gamemakers are using the rain against Cato and Thresh, but we might as well use the rain to our advantage." Haymitch suggested.

"How?" Effie's voice was low.

They stepped off of the elevator and into the loud party the Capitol was throwing for the Games. "We're going to need to get them some food," Haymitch said.

"You've got some funds left..." Effie took a glass of sparkling wine off of a passing attendant's tray. "...why not..."

"There's not enough. At this point in the Games, I've got about enough for a small loaf of bread and I can't be sending in a thing until Katniss wakes up. That could be tomorrow or the next day. Who knows how much the food will cost by then." There was concern in Haymitch's voice.

"Then we'll have to think of some way for these sponsors to part with a lot of their money." Effie took a sip from her glass.

"We're going to need a ton of money, Effie. Finnick Odair's trident kind of money."

Effie sighed and looked around the room. Her gaze landed on the very Victor they were speaking of. Finnick was hanging on a woman at least three times his age. The sight of it turned Effie's stomach. "Then we're just going to have to put Finnick and his trident to shame," she lifted her shoulders and pursed her lips. "By the time we're through...no one will even remember that damn trident."

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It had been a long and worrisome day for Gale. Katniss had returned from the feast with Peeta's medication, but had immediately collapsed from exhaustion...the injury to her head or both. Gale had intended on going home after the feast, but it had taken a lot longer than he had expected. People kept stopping him, congratulating him on Katniss' success. None of them took into account that she was unconscious and bleeding. All of them assumed she would wake up and be her normal self again.

Gale's feelings of hatred towards her had vanished. He was now worried for her. Petrified that she wouldn't wake up. That she'd bleed to death in the arena. He wanted Peeta to come out of his sleep syrup haze and take care of her, but Peeta hadn't moved.

It had been early afternoon before Gale finally made it out of the square and though he wanted to go home he had to go to the woods to take care of his responsibilities. He needed to hunt and gather. He was sure Katniss' family needed some provisions and he knew his family needed some game. By the time he was done it was nightfall. He had just made it out of the woods when he heard the fence turn on.

A few more minutes and he would've been trapped in the forest overnight. Gale made a mental note to go back to his normal routine as of the next day. There were too many lives depending on him.

Gale knocked on the Everdeen's door and waited for someone to answer. He knocked again when no one came. After a few minutes Prim opened it up with tears in her eyes.

"Prim? Are you okay?" Gale reached out and touched the girl's shoulder.

"Yeah," Prim ran back into the living room. "Come in," she called out.

Gale walked in and saw why she was crying. Peeta had woken up and was trying his best to take care of Katniss. The more water he poured over her head the more blood there seemed to be. "Geez," Gale said under his breath. He put his hand on the edge of a chair to keep himself steady.

"Head wounds tend to bleed more than the rest of the body," Katniss' mother said as she held Prim's hand. "Right, Prim?"

"Yes, mom." This news didn't seem to appease Prim.

"They do?" Gale asked.

"There's more blood vessels in the head and Katniss' extends into a portion of her scalp," Prim answered. "But her cut's pretty deep."

"Not so deep that it'll need to be stitched." Katniss' mother seemed to be keeping her cool. Gale was sure it was for Prim's sake, though Prim was usually pretty good when it came to sick or injured people.

"We don't really know that without looking at it, mom."

"Yes we do. If it needed to be stitched, the blood wouldn't have started to congeal, Prim."

Gale felt like the women were speaking in a foreign language.

"That's true," Prim wiped her eyes. "It'll stop bleeding now that Peeta's putting a bandage on it."

"That's right," Katniss' mom pat Prim's hand. "And he's putting it on there good and snug."

"So she'll be all right?" Gale asked.

"I'm sure she'll be fine," her mother answered. "She just needs some rest."

Gale watched as Peeta began stripping Katniss of her clothing. "Uh...I brought you some rabbit and herbs and greens and...stuff."

"Thank you, Gale." Katniss' mother stood up and said, "Prim, why don't you get Gale some of that cheese you made and I'll get him some of the medicine I brewed up earlier."

Gale kept glancing at the television set and watching as Peeta worked to take care of Katniss. He couldn't believe how quickly Peeta had recovered. "Speaking of medicine...have you ever seen anyone get better that quickly before?" Gale pointed to the television set.

"Oh, yes." Katniss' mother answered. "The medications they have at the Capitol are very advanced. Katniss administered his medication at least ten hours ago. So his wound should be closed up and his infection almost gone."

"So...he's healed?"

"Not completely. It'll take some time, but he can function. He should be able to walk on his own by tomorrow, without having to brace himself against the wall."

"Wow," Gale said with a look of disbelief on his face. "That's kind of amazing."

"That's modern medicine," Katniss' mother corrected him.

"And you're sure Katniss will be okay?" Gale whispered under his breath to her.

"I'm positive. Her body needs to rejuvenate and with Cato going after Thresh, I believe the Gamemakers will give her the chance to heal." This was the first time since the start of the Games that Gale had seen Katniss' mother looking confident.

"She's going to come home, you know?" Gale said.

"They both are," Prim smiled as she handed him a package with some goat cheese.

Gale swallowed the lump in his throat and said, "Yup." He took the cheese, forgot the medicine, left their goods and made his way home.

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The boy from District 1 was standing at the cave's entrance. There was an arrow sticking out of his throat and blood gushing from the wound. "Thought you killed me?" He said to Katniss. He took the spear he was holding in his hand and threw it with such force Katniss could feel a breeze when it went by her and entered Peeta's body.

"Peeta," she whimpered. "Peeta."

"Katniss?" Peeta tried to rouse her. "Katniss? Wake up, Katniss." He placed his hands on her shoulders and shook her gently.

She opened her eyes and felt a rush of relief as the sight of Peeta came into view. "Peeta."

"Hi there," he smiled softly as he let out a sigh. "It's good to see your eyes again."

"Good to see yours too." Katniss feared they'd be full of animosity for what she had done to him prior to the feast. She was relieved to see they were full of love instead. "How long have I been out?"

"I'm not sure. I woke up last night and saw you lying next to me in a pool of *veryscary* blood." He lifted his hand to her bandage, but didn't touch it. "I think it finally stopped bleeding, but I wouldn't get up if I were you." Katniss lifted her fingers to touch her head, but Peeta stopped her. "Don't touch it. I don't want you reopening it again."

Katniss nodded her head and found herself getting dizzy from the mere gesture.

Peeta placed his hand behind her head and lifted a bottle of water to her lips and helped her to drink. When she was done she said, "Hey, you're better."

"Much better. Whatever was in that needle did the trick. By this morning I was able to walk around on my own."

"That's great, Peeta." Katniss let her head rest against Peeta's hand. "I'm so glad."

"Yeah...well..." He shrugged and tried not to look angry.

"Don't tell me you're mad at me for going to the feast," Katniss knew he'd be furious with her.

"This isn't the time, Katniss. You're still pretty weak." Peeta was more than angry with her for going to the feast. Yes, he was glad he was alive, but she had lied to him...tricked him into taking sleep syrup and risked her life for him. He had spent the entire night watching over her, willing her to wake up, and she hadn't moved a muscle until this morning. So, yes...he was mad. "Almost all of the swelling in my leg is gone."

"Did you eat?"

"Yeah," he answered sheepishly. "I ate three pieces of that groosling before I realized it probably has to last us awhile. Don't worry. I put myself on a diet," he grinned at her as he placed her head on the sleeping bag.

"No, you need to eat. I'll go hunting again soon."

"Not too soon. You just rest for now. Let me take care of you for a little while, okay?" He took her hand and placed a kiss against her fingers. "I'm going to get you something to eat." He turned to the backpack and began going through it. "Would you prefer raisins with your groosling or raisins?"

Katniss smiled up at him and said, "I think I'll take the raisins."

"Excellent choice." Peeta prepared some food for her, and then sat her up against the cave wall. After feeding her he noticed her shivering and said, "Sorry, your boots and socks are still damp and this weather is no help at all." As if on cue a clap of thunder followed up his statement. "And it's just getting worse too. I'm not sure what brought it on though."

"Cato and Thresh," Katniss answered without thinking. "Foxface is hiding out somewhere...oooh she's a sneaky one and Clove cut me after I saved..." Katniss let her sentence trail off and looked to the side. She had said way too much.

Peeta gave Katniss a tilt of his head and said, "After you saved?" Katniss started playing with the string in the sleeping blanket.

"Katniss, I know Clove is dead. I saw her in the sky last night." He placed his hands over hers to stop her fidgeting. "Did *you* kill Clove?"

"No. Thresh did," Katniss said quietly.

"Thresh?" Peeta dropped his head back and blew out a breath. "Do you know how lucky you are that he didn't catch you too?"

Katniss swallowed the lump that was forming in her throat. She was debating on whether or not she should tell Peeta what had occurred at the feast. She had already lied to him when she fed him the berries and she was certain she hadn't yet faced his wrath for that. If she added onto that by not telling him everything that happened... Katniss lifted her face to Peeta's and said, "He did catch me, but he let me go."

"He what?" Peeta's eyes just about bugged out of his head.

"He let me go because of Rue," Katniss said with a catch in her throat. "And...because I saved him from Clove."

"You...you saved him?" Peeta sat back and took in the information. "Why, Katniss?" He didn't understand.

"Peeta, a lot happened while we were apart in the arena. You had a false alliance with the Careers, but I had a real one with Rue. She was..." Katniss thought of the tiny courageous child, who loved music

and helped her to outwit the Careers with the tracker jacker nest. "Rue was my friend." Peeta sat back and listened as Katniss told him about the little girl. "She saved my life. She pointed out the tracker jacker nest and rolled me under a bush after I was stung and put leaves on my stings. She watched over me until I was better and afterwards we became allies. She even found your trail of blood," Katniss put her hand on Peeta's. "She wanted to help me find you, but first we had to disable the Careers. We came up with a plan and it worked too." Katniss smiled at the memory of the Careers supplies blowing up as she explained, in detail, how she destroyed the pyramid of food, to Peeta.

"So *you* were the reason the Careers lost everything?" He smiled, remembering how sure he had been that the Gamemakers caused the explosion in an attempt to change things up in the arena.

"Yes." Katniss threaded her fingers through Peeta's. "Unfortunately I lost my hearing too." Katniss lifted her hand and pointed to her deaf ear. "Afterwards, I was supposed to meet up with Rue, but she didn't show. I waited for her and then I went to look for her and...and..." Katniss could feel the tears.

"It's okay." Peeta lifted his hand and brushed the tear away that fell onto her cheek. "Take your time."

"She called to me. I could hear her screaming out my name and I went running to her, but the boy from One trapped her in a net and then he...he..."

"The boy from One?" Peeta began to worry as Katniss continued.

"He threw a spear into her and killed her. He killed her Peeta." Katniss let her head fall against Peeta's shoulder and cried for Rue.

"My God." Peeta felt his stomach churning. "You're sure it was the boy from One?" His head was pounding. His pulse drumming faster and faster as he awaited Katniss' answer.

"Yes. I killed him."

Peeta let the news sink in as he said, "I'm sorry, Katniss. I'm so sorry." He swallowed back his tears.

"It's not your fault, Peeta. You didn't kill her."

"Yes, I did." Peeta confessed.

Katniss slowly lifted her head off of Peeta's shoulder and looked at him. "What?"

"I killed that little girl, Katniss. I killed her," he could barely get the words out.

"No you didn't," Katniss sniffed. "I didn't get to her in time."

"You don't understand, Katniss. I could've killed him...twice. I could've..." Peeta stood up and pounded his fist against the cave wall. "Right after the bloodbath! I had the chance, Katniss! I had him and I could've killed him, but I didn't! I made a deal with the Careers...I couldn't kill One or Two until after we found you, but...he was right there!" Peeta held his hands out in front of him as though he was going to squeeze Marvel's neck. "I should've killed him."

"No, Peeta. No." Katniss spoke from her spot on the floor. "You couldn't have. The Careers would've killed you then and there. We'd both be dead right now if you had killed him."

"You don't know that," Peeta turned to her. "You don't know..."

"I do know! You can't protect everybody, Peeta! You just can't!" Katniss held her hands out to him and said, "Come here." He didn't budge. "Please...come here." Peeta took a moment then sat next to her. Katniss pulled his head to her lips and whispered in his ear, "You didn't send Rue into the arena." She held Peeta by both cheeks and said, "Do you understand me? None of this is your fault. You did not kill Rue." Peeta nodded and leaned his head against the cave wall.

They sat in silence for a few minutes before he asked, "What happened with Thresh?" Katniss explained why she saved him and told Peeta she was sure that Thresh let her go out of a sense of obligation. Peeta let out a burst of air and said, "You still don't get it, do you?"

"Don't get what?"

Peeta lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her wrist. "You know, Katniss...I think part of the reason you have such an effect on people is because you don't know how much you impact them." Katniss squinted her eyes at him as if asking him what he was talking about and Peeta shook his head. "So...Cato and Thresh, huh? I hate to say this, but...I hope Cato kills him so we don't have to."

Katniss turned her head in regret. She should've let Clove kill Thresh at the Cornucopia. Peeta had pretty much told her so, but she didn't want Thresh to die. She didn't want any of them to die. She wanted to go home. She turned her head to Peeta's and said, "I miss District 12."

"Then lie down...close your eyes and dream about home. Before you know it, we'll be there." Peeta lifted her and placed her in the sleeping bag.

"I can't dream," Katniss remembered the nightmare she had about the boy from District 1 killing Peeta. "I don't know if I'll ever be able to dream again."

"Sure you can," Peeta snuggled up next to her and lowered his voice. "Close your eyes." When she didn't do it, he said, "Do you trust me, Katniss?"

"Yes," she said softly.

"Then close your eyes." He watched her as she followed his instructions. Peeta knew the answer to the question, but he asked anyway. "What makes you happy, Katniss?"

"You," she answered without taking a breath.

There was surprise in Peeta's voice as he continued. "Uh...okay..."

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Gale did his morning routine. Woke up early, went into the woods, checked his snares, tried his hand at some hunting with the bow and arrows, actually shot some game, did some gathering then made his rounds. He debated whether or not to stop at the bakery, but he really had no choice. His family and Katniss' needed the food and he had been putting his personal needs ahead of theirs for too long. It was time to put his pride aside for the sake of his family. He held his breath as he knocked on the backdoor of the bakery and waited for the baker to answer. When the oldest son came instead, Gale was relieved, but the boy told Gale to wait while he got his father.

"Morning, Gale." The man sounded like he was in good spirits. Gale supposed he should be considering his son was still alive and had a good chance of returning home.

"Morning, sir." Gale held out three squirrels. "I brought these for you. Wasn't sure if you needed any."

"As a matter of fact I do. Been awhile since we've had some fresh meat around here." The baker took the squirrels from Gale and said, "You must be happy to see Katniss has come to."

"What?" Gale's face perked up. "She's awake?"

"Just woke up a few minutes ago. Peeta's giving her some water." The baker informed him.

"Is she okay? I mean...is she..." Gale stammered.

"She seems to be doing fine. Looks a little lightheaded, but otherwise...I'd say she's no worse for the wear. I was pretty happy to see my boy walking around on his own this morning. They're getting better." The baker thumped Gale on the shoulder and said, "Let me get you something so you can be on your way."

"Thank you, sir." Gale's feet could barely stay in place. He still had a game bag full of rabbit, greens, berries... The square was the closest television screen to him, but it was also loaded with Peacekeepers. There was no way he could go there. He could run home, but that would still take too long. He was tempted to ask the baker to watch his stash and head to the square, but the witch might call the Peacekeepers on him or steal his supplies, so he couldn't take the chance. The only thing Gale could do was race home. He grabbed the bags the baker handed him without saying a word and headed off.

Gale busted through his front door in time to see Peeta lying Katniss down in the sleeping bag.

"I miss District 12," Katniss said. We miss having you here, Gale thought.

"Then lie down...close your eyes and dream about home. Before you know it, we'll be there." Peeta told Katniss as he placed her in the sleeping bag.

"I can't dream. I don't know if I'll ever be able to dream again."

"Sure you can," Peeta crawled into the sleeping bag with Katniss and put his arm around her. "Close your eyes." Katniss just stared at him. "Do you trust me, Katniss?"

"Yes." Gale was surprised she answered him that way. Katniss didn't trust anyone.

"Then close your eyes." Peeta paused then said, "What makes you happy, Katniss?" Gale knew the answer to that. It was the woods.

"You." Gale definitely didn't expect that.

"Uh...okay..." Peeta began stroking Katniss' cheek. "I want you to picture you and me...we're sitting underneath the oak tree. Your favorite oak tree." The oak tree again? Gale asked himself. Where was this tree and why hadn't Gale known about it prior to the Games?

Peeta leaned his head closer to her good ear. "It's warm in District 12 today." There was a clap of thunder outside of their cave followed up by a bolt of lightning. Good luck getting her to believe that, thought Gale.

"The sun is shining, but not under the tree. We're sitting in the shade and there's a slight breeze." Peeta threaded his fingers through Katniss'. "If you listen, you can hear the mockingjays. They've taken up the sounds of the robins. The leaves of the oak are rustling in the wind and we're surrounded by nature's music. Can you hear it, Katniss?" He asked her softly.

"Yes," she whispered. Gale looked at Katniss. Peeta seemed to be putting her in some kind of trance.

"Can you feel the breeze?"

"Yes," her voice was barely audible.

"We've laid out a blanket under the tree and you've got your head in my lap."

"I like lying like that," Katniss said.

"I know you do." Peeta began brushing his fingers against the hair by her ear. "I like playing with your hair. It's soft...shiny..." Peeta inhaled and said, "Smells like fresh air." He was quiet for a moment then told her, "We're not talking today. We don't need to talk, do we? Today we're just happy to be together. We're just enjoying our time with each other...looking at each other...appreciating the little things." Peeta looked down at Katniss and said, "Like your freckles, and the way your nose tilts upwards at the end. It's cute." He bent down and kissed it.

Katniss whispered, "Your eyelashes curl...they're so long."

"Mmmm..." Peeta snuggled closer to Katniss and Gale felt his heart cracking in two. Something inside of him said this wasn't the first time Peeta had done this with Katniss.

"We're home, Katniss." Peeta began stroking his hand up and down Katniss' arm. "Relax. Let yourself go."

Gale could see Katniss' head tilting to the side. "Where are you, Katniss?" Peeta asked her.

"Home...with you..." She lifted her arm and wrapped it around him. Gale could barely make out her words, they had been so sleepy. "I'm always home when I'm with you, Peeta."

Gale was sure that the knife Clove had thrown at Katniss the day before had pierced his heart. How many times could he sit by and let her do this to him? He wasn't sure, but it kept happening. Now it wasn't just Katniss causing the pain, but Peeta too. It was as though Peeta was going out of his way to hurt Gale now that he was better. He looked at the bag he got from Peeta's father and threw it across the room. Hazelle, who had been watching from the kitchen entry way, picked up the bag and placed it on the table.

"Gale, they're not trying to hurt you."

Gale stood up and grabbed his game bag. He took out the items his family needed and left the rest inside for trades and Katniss' family. "Could've fooled me," he said with hatred dripping from his voice.

"This isn't about *you*, Gale." Hazelle turned him by his shoulders. "This is about them. They're the ones in the Games. They're the ones who have to fight for their lives, not you."

"I know that!"

"Don't raise your voice to me!" Hazelle put her son in his place.

"Sorry," Gale said under his breath. "I just don't know what to do...how to..."

"I can't tell you how to feel about all of this, but I can tell you one thing. Katniss went into these Games thinking you were her friend. You led her to believe that's what you were and that's what you need to be. So quit wallowing in self pity and start acting like her friend." Hazelle pushed the game bag against her son and said, "I'm sure her mother is waiting for some food, and you told Katniss you'd take care of them, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then you go do right by them and stop acting like a child." Hazelle held up the package Gale threw across the room and said, "And don't go wasting food either. It's too precious to be throwing around willy nilly."

Gale took one last look at the television set and saw Katniss sleeping peacefully in Peeta's arms while he guarded her in their cave...their home during the Games. Keep her safe in the arena, Peeta, he thought to himself. But I'm sticking to the bargain we made in the Justice Building. I'm taking care of her when she gets home.

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"Maximus, it's been a pleasure." Haymitch shook the sponsor's hand.

"The pleasure's been mine, Haymitch...Effie." The sponsor reached out and kissed Effie about two inches away from her face.

"Maximus, always a joy." Effie smiled at prospective sponsor.

"As I said, I'd be happy to hop on board, however..."

"No need to explain, Maximus. We've got sponsors lining up around the block for our Star Crossed Lovers," Effie gushed. "Those two are the talk of the town. We just assumed you'd want to be a part of the record breaker. Now that we know you're not interested... It was lovely seeing you again, darling." Effie turned and walked away with Haymitch.

"What record breaker?" Haymitch whispered to Effie.

"Wait for it," Effie whispered back.

"Oh, Effie! Effie!" Effie stopped walking and turned to face Maximus. "Did you say record breaker?"

"Yes," Effie faced Haymitch and gave him a playful smack. "Don't tell me you didn't tell him, Haymitch?"

Haymitch shrugged and said, "Guess it slipped my mind."

Effie stepped behind Haymitch and made a drinking motion as if Haymitch were drunk to Maximus. Maximus nodded his head at Effie as if they were sharing a secret. "As you know Maximus, the most expensive thing ever to be sent into the Games has been Finnick Odair's trident, but Haymitch is on a mission to beat that this year."

"Really?" Maximus looked intrigued. "And what could possibly cost more than a trident?"

Effie flashed a world winning smile and said, "Why lamb stew, of course."

Haymitch gave Effie a quizzical look. There was no way lamb stew could cost as much as a trident and Effie knew it. The only way lamb

stew would cost as much as the weapon would be if they sent it in with plates dipped in gold. Haymitch's eyes perked up. He put his hand on the sponsor's shoulder and said, "You see, this isn't going to be just any meal. This is going to be something really romantic." And it's going to give Katniss and Peeta time to recover, he thought to himself. "Plates..."

"China," Effie corrected.

"Utensils..." Haymitch said.

"Flatware," Effie lifted her eyebrows and grinned. "Only the best for our tributes."

"Interesting..." Maximus lamented. "Very interesting. And you say you've got others in on this already?"

"Oh yes," Effie lied. "Who wouldn't want to be a part of this, but it's a very exclusive group."

"Good," Maximus said. "I wouldn't want to share too much of the glory."

"Exactly!" Haymitch said. "So...should I sign you up, Maximus?"

"How much are we talking about?" Maximus looked between the two of them. "If I'm going to invest, I want it to be a hefty amount. I know how much that trident cost."

Haymitch lifted the corner of his mouth in his trademark grin and said, "Oh, don't worry about that. I'll be happy to put you down for a good portion of it."

Once Effie and Haymitch got out of Maximus' hearing, Haymitch said to Effie, "Record breaker, huh?"

"With this weather, Katniss won't be able to hunt. They're going to need food." Effie lifted her glass of wine and smiled behind it as though she and Haymitch were having the time of their lives.

Haymitch took a sip of his whiskey and said, "You really think we'll be able to do this? It's just a picnic we're talking about here." Haymitch stepped closer to Effie and asked, "What items do we need to break the record?"

"If we can get the proper place setting of china and the best flatware...we'll break the record with that alone." Effie lifted her glass as if toasting someone across the room.

"Seriously?" Haymitch couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Plates and utensils cost that much money?"

"China and flatware and yes they can be quite costly."

"Who do you suggest we hit up for that?" Haymitch asked.

"Why our favorite married couple of course." Effie said with a sly grin. "Iola *Primrose* *Vulgaris*."

"And her Career lover husband?" Haymitch wasn't too sure they'd go for it. "Effie, I just don't think..."

"Trust me on this one, Haymitch. Ask the woman about her name and she'll be putty in your hands." Effie turned and whispered, "Speak of the *Vulgaris*'."

"Effie! Haymitch!"

"If it isn't Quillan and his lovely wife Iola Primrose," Haymitch shook the man's hand and took his wife's hand in his. He paused and said, "Iola Primrose? Flowers, right?"

"Why, yes!" The woman beamed. "I was named after the garden I was conceived in." She gushed. "My parents were quite literal individuals."

Haymitch kept the smile plastered on his face even though the details of her conception was more information than he wanted to know about. "Well, your parents chose exceptional names."

"Beautiful names for a beautiful woman," Quillan added.

"Oh darling, you're always saying that." lola rubbed up against him.

"I swear you two are just the sweetest newlyweds." Effie beamed. "Haymitch, you should've seen their wedding cake. It was to die for and their china..."

"Yes, our china was the talk of the Capitol, wasn't it dear?" lola said without waiting for an answer. "Everyone loved it. Just loved it. Hand painted...24 karat gold...it was simply breathtaking."

"I wonder, Effie..." Haymitch shook his head. "No...never mind. It's a crazy idea."

"What?" lola wondered.

"You think?" Effie asked Haymitch, ignoring lola.

"I'm not sure...I mean...it would be monumental," Haymitch said to Effie as if they were having a private conversation.

Effie noticed Quillan's look of inquisition. "Historical really."

"What would be historical?" Quillan asked.

Effie brushed off Haymitch's idea as if it were crazy. "Haymitch thinks that the record for the most expensive sponsor gift can be broken this

year. He's even got sponsors signed up for it, but...well you tell them Haymitch. It's your idea."

"You see..." Haymitch put his arms around Lola and Quillan's back.

"The plan is to send in a romantic picnic to Katniss and Peeta, but not just any picnic. We're talking the works...china...flatware...lamb stew...wild rice... And here's the thing," Haymitch looked over his shoulder as if making sure no one else was listening. "I'm only allowing a few sponsors in on the deal. This record is going to be in the history books for years on end and we don't want a list of people on there. Quillan, you know...how many sponsors did it take to send in that trident?"

"There were over twenty of us."

"Whew..." Haymitch blew out a breath and made a face. "Twenty? I wouldn't want to share the bragging rights with nineteen other people for a decade. Don't know how you've been doing it. You're a better man than me." Haymitch patted Quillan on the back.

"Darling," Lola said. "What if we paid for the china?"

"We *could* do that." Quillan said quietly, and copied Haymitch's actions by looking around the room to make sure no one else was listening.

"But I'd have to put a stipulation on it. I'd want it to be the same pattern we used for our wedding." Quillan glanced at his wife. "In honor of my very own Primrose."

"Of course," Haymitch agreed. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

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"Hey sleepy head," Peeta leaned over Katniss and whispered in her ear. "Wake up. I'm hungry."

Katniss stretched and yawned. "Wow," she noticed that the sheet of plastic had been placed over her to deflect the rain, which was now coming down in buckets. "I see the weather hasn't gotten any better."

"Nope," Peeta shook his head. He began taking the food out of the backpack and asked, "Should we try and ration it?"

"No. It'll go bad if we don't eat it."

They ate what little food they had left then tried to make out the Capitol's symbol from the opening in the cave. There were no images displayed in the sky.

"I guess Cato and Thresh still haven't had it out yet," Katniss said. "What's out there anyway?"

"Out where?" Peeta asked as he walked back to the sleeping bag.

"In that field Thresh ran into?" Katniss joined him.

Peeta shuddered at the memory of the morning he and the Careers attempted to go after Thresh. "Grass. Tall grass as far as your eyes can see."

"Did you go in there?"

"No. No one really wanted to." Peeta sat back on his hands. "We went in a few feet, but it was kind of creepy. We had no clue what was out there."

"I bet Thresh knows what's out there. I bet that's why he looks better fed now than when we started the Games." Katniss joked.

"Either that or he's got very generous sponsors." Peeta glanced up and said, "I wonder what it would take to get some bread around here, Haymitch?"

"I'm sure he used up a lot of sponsor gifts on the sleep syrup," Katniss hadn't meant to bring it up, but it was too late. The cat was out of the bag.

"Yeah...about that." Peeta glared at her.

"I know what you're going to say and I'm sorry I tricked you, but..."

"No...no buts, Katniss. You didn't just pull a trick on me. You lied to me." Peeta said with pain in his voice.

"Everything worked out, so no harm done," Katniss tried to play it off.

"No harm done?" Peeta moved closer to Katniss and pulled her to him. "You really believe that?"

No, Katniss didn't believe that at all, but she couldn't say it. "You're alive, right?"

"And in your mind, that reinforces the idea that you did the right thing?" Peeta could feel anger bubbling inside of himself.

"I did do the right thing." Katniss held her ground.

Peeta shook his head and gripped her by the upper arms. "Don't!"

"Don't what?" Katniss challenged him. "Don't save your life?"

"Don't die for me! You won't be doing me any favors by dying for me, Katniss!"

"And you think if you died for me you'd be doing *me* a favor? Are you under some kind of misconception that my life would be so much better if you died, Peeta?"

"Better me than you!"

"Oh, please." Katniss shook her head. "You're not the only one that can risk their life for someone they..." she closed her eyes and fought the emotions that were coursing through her. She refused to let people see this side of her. She had sworn no one would see this part of their relationship again. "Forget it."

Peeta's grip on her arms loosened. "I don't want to forget it." He took his finger and turned her face to his. "Someone they, what?" He held his breath with the hopes that she would say she loved him too.

"Drop it, Peeta." Katniss tried to turn away from him, but she couldn't seem to drag her eyes away from his.

"Drop it?" Peeta was frustrated beyond belief. She could throw herself into the middle of the feast and fight two Careers plus Thresh, but she couldn't bring herself to say three little words, then again, she might not love him after all. This thought, combined with her deception caused Peeta an enormous amount of aggravation. "Fine." Peeta dropped his hands from her shoulders. "Consider it dropped." He had an edge to his voice.

"Good," Katniss voice was clipped.

"Perfect," Peeta glared at her.

Katniss couldn't believe she started a fight with him. She didn't want to let out her true feelings in front of the cameras, but starting an argument was low, even for her. She pursed her lips and grabbed

Peeta's hand. "I don't want to fight with you." She felt horrible about lying to him. About not telling him how she truly felt.

Peeta nodded his head at her. "I don't want to fight with you either, but I'm upset with you, Katniss. So, maybe you're right. Maybe we should just drop it." Peeta let Katniss hold his hand, but he didn't hold hers back.

"You're *upset* with me? I saved your life, Peeta. You'd be dead by now if I hadn't gone to that feast."

"And you'd be dead if Thresh hadn't let you go!" Peeta felt Katniss squeeze his wrist. "You'd be dead! We'd *both* be dead! So, what good would've come from that?"

"This is ridiculous." She pulled her hand away from his. She felt a shiver run up her spine. The Gamemakers had turned the temperature down in the arena and it was freezing in their cave. "You're mad at me because you're alive. Sorry I didn't let you die," she said with sarcasm dripping from her voice.

"No, I'm mad at you because you lied to me. Because you deceived me with those berries. Because you betrayed my trust." Katniss lifted her face to his. Peeta could see the pain in her eyes and his voice which had been filled with anger only seconds ago was now filled with anguish. He had to help her to understand why he didn't want her to risk herself for his survival. He had to find out why she jeopardized so much for him. "Because you took the most precious thing in the world to me..." he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. "...you...and threatened your life. Why, Katniss? Why did you do that?"

"I had to," she said quietly.

"That's not an answer."

"You saved my life..." It was a stupid reason to give Peeta, but she thought she'd try it out.

"So I was an obligation? Like you were to Thresh?" Peeta knew that would get to her.

"No!" Katniss' eyes flew to his. "Not at all!"

"Then why did you go? What was so important that you'd risk your promise to Prim...your own life, just to save mine?" Come on, Katniss, he thought. Just tell me how you feel.

"Peeta..." Katniss looked around the cave. She wanted to tell him, everyone is listening...watching, but she didn't know how. Then she remembered the night before the Games. They were on the roof of the Training Center and they wished they had a wind chime area in the arena so no one could hear them. "Lip reading would be a perfect skill for me right now...you know...with the bad ear and all. I'm having a hard time hearing everything you've said."

Peeta lifted up the corner of his mouth in a grin. He understood her secret message. She wanted to answer him, but she didn't want to do it in front of the Capitol. "Lip reading would be a very useful skill out here. I definitely think we should practice that." Peeta reached his arm behind Katniss and flipped the sleeping bag down. "It's bedtime. Why don't you get in?"

"I'll keep watch," Katniss suggested. "I had plenty of sleep today."

"That's fine, but you can watch from in here with me. No one's going to hunt us down in this rain."

Katniss lay down in his arms and rested her head against Peeta's chest. Her bow and arrows were at the ready. She listened to the

sound of Peeta's drumming heart and looked around the cave taking in the splashes of moonlight reflecting off of the puddles of rain. Things were still unsettled between her and Peeta and she knew it. She had been too worried about the nation watching the outcome of their disagreement to tell Peeta she was sorry for lying to him. To tell him she loved him. She looked up at Peeta and noticed him staring up at the cave's ceiling.

"Peeta?"

"Hmmm?" He looked down at her.

There were so many nights Katniss had spent alone in the arena. So many nights she pulled the sleeping bag over her head and spoke to him in her mind and here he was, right in front of her, and she didn't know what to say to him. "My nose is cold."

"Come up here." Katniss lifted herself up and leaned over him. Peeta cupped his hand over her nose and blew against it then placed a kiss on the tip of it. "Better?"

"A little." Katniss looked down at him and said, "I have an idea." She pulled the sleeping bag over their heads and said loud enough for the audience to hear, "I used to do this when I slept in the trees to keep warm." Then she placed a finger over her lips to shush Peeta and pointed upwards to the outside of the sleeping bag. She pressed her lips against his ear and whispered, "They can't hear us if we're quiet."

Peeta grinned and nodded. "Okay," he mouthed.

"I'm sorry, I lied to you," she whispered. She pulled back and looked into his eyes.

"I know," he whispered.

Katniss lay on her side and faced him. She trailed her hand along his face, "Forgive me?" She mouthed. He nodded, yes. Their lips touched. Once. Twice. Their eyes remained opened and focused on one another.

Peeta trailed his fingers down her arm and let his hand rest against her waist.

Katniss placed the palm of her hand against his beating heart.

It was dark in the confines of the sleeping bag, but for a few streams of moonlight coming through the top of it. The blue of Peeta's eyes seemed to glow in the darkness. The silver of Katniss' reflected the sparse rays of light that shone through the bag's opening.

Katniss could make out the outline of Peeta's lips in the darkness. She traced the arches of them with her fingertip and placed a soft kiss on his top lip.

Peeta brushed his nose against Katniss' and trailed his slightly parted mouth across hers. His breath was heavy and hot against her skin. Radiating its heat back against his own. Her fingers were touching his face so tenderly, it caused a chill to run up his spine.

Katniss pulled away from him to get a better look at his face. She needed to take all of him in. She wanted to memorize every curve...every line of his face. She sighed as she felt his fingers dig into her hips.

Peeta dipped his head down to hers and placed a kiss against the corner of her mouth. "I'm so in love with you," he spoke into her bad ear.

Katniss could feel his lips moving against her cheek, but she didn't know what he was saying. She bit the corner of her lip and whispered to him, a little too loudly, "What?"

Peeta tried to stifle his laughter and shook his head before pressing his lips against hers. His hand roamed up her back and stopped at her neck. He pressed his fingers into her neck pushing her lips firmly against his. Their mouths had become slick and hot. The air under the cover of the sleeping bag was thick.

Katniss felt Peeta's passion for her stir something within her chest. She felt one of his hands gently tug at her braid then slide up her torso. She reached for the clasp that held her hair in place and removed the band and began threading her fingers through her hair, undoing the weave she always kept her hair in. She heard Peeta's sigh when he discovered what she had done and felt his fingers plunge into her tresses. Her head dropped back and she let out a breath into the night. "Peeta," she choked out his name as her fingers dug into his flesh. Allowing him access to her throat.

Peeta's lips trailed up her neck and back up to her lips. He felt her body stiffen against him at the first touch of his tongue to hers before relaxing against him. Though he tried not to, he couldn't help the moan that escaped from his throat into her mouth. Katniss pushed his head closer to hers and Peeta knew this was her sign of pleasure. He loved it when she gave herself up to him so freely.

Katniss pressed her body against his side. She couldn't get close enough to him. She felt his fingers getting tangled in her hair and electricity coursing through her veins. She couldn't catch her breath. She pulled away from him to capture some air, but his lips were relentless.

Peeta began taking little tastes of her skin...her jaw...her cheek. He worked his way around to her ear. "I love you," he whispered then looked into her eyes. He held her gaze and said it again, "I love you, Katniss."

She loved him too. She wanted to tell him, "Peeta, I..." The cold night air startled her. Peeta had thrown the sleeping bag off of them.

"Your head is bleeding again." There was a hint of panic in his eyes as he saw a drop of blood fall from her head.

Katniss hadn't realized how labored their breathing had become. "Oh," she reached up to touch it.

"No...Let me." Peeta swallowed and pushed her flat onto her back. He pressed the bandage down for a few minutes until the bleeding stopped. The entire time he stroked her hair back from her face.

Katniss felt the pressure of Peeta's fingers let up and he lay back down flat on his back. "Thanks," she said absentmindedly.

"Sure," he gulped.

Katniss looked around the cave trying to control her heart rate. "You should probably get some sleep." She sat up and gathered her hair together so she could braid it.

Peeta stopped Katniss and pulled her down and whispered in her ear, "Leave it down." His fingers threaded through her satiny brown locks.

Katniss nodded her head then placed it on his chest as she stared at the opening of the cave. She had intended on keeping watch over her and Peeta, but the feeling of his fingers brushing through her hair relaxed her to the point of slumber.

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"On the bright side...fights usually end with making up," Effie said with a lilt in her voice as she and Haymitch entered the suite.

"They better. Those sponsors just dropped a ton of dough on those two..." Haymitch took notice of the television screen and said to Cinna, "What's going on with them? Still fighting?"

"Not really."

Haymitch walked to the bar and poured a glass of whiskey. "If they want to eat, they better show those sponsors a great make up session."

"Did you get the funds already?" Cinna asked.

"Yeah, I got the funds, but you know how the Games work. Can't just send a gift in without a good reason. They've got to give me something to work with." Haymitch sipped at his drink.

"Thankfully Haymitch secured the money prior to their little spat." Effie sat on the end of the sofa. "Where's Portia?"

"In bed. She was exhausted." Cinna answered.

"Looks like Katniss and Peeta are doing the same." Effie pointed out as the pair took shelter in their sleeping bag.

"I'm telling you Effie; those two kids are going to have to do something stupendous for us to send in that picnic." Haymitch worried.

"What's the big deal, Haymitch? It's just a picnic." Cinna put his sketchpad on the table.

"No, it's the most expensive sponsor gift in the history of the Games." Haymitch informed him.

"A picnic? Have the Gamemakers raised the price of Katniss and Peeta's food?" Cinna feared the Gamemakers were getting ready to pull another trick on the tributes.

Effie let out a little laugh. "Not exactly."

Haymitch squinted his eyes at the television set and said, "Turn that up."

Effie raised the volume on the remote and said, "Why? It looks like they're going to sleep."

"Shut up a second," Haymitch walked closer to the screen. "Make it louder."

"Do you hear something, Haym...Oh..." Cinna looked away from the television.

Effie's eyebrows shot up when she heard Peeta say, "I'm so in love with you."

"Son of a bitch!" Haymitch yelled.

"What?" Katniss' voice was barely heard.

"Great! The whole damn nation heard him, sweetheart and you can't?!" Haymitch screamed to the television set.

"I don't think they know we can hear them," Cinna's eyes were darting back and forth across the floor as he tried to ignore the noises coming from the television set.

"Perhaps we should turn the sound down, Haymitch." Effie suggested. "It's obvious they want some privacy."

"Privacy?" Haymitch turned to Effie. "There's no such thing as privacy in the Games."

Cinna raised his eyebrows as Katniss and Peeta's breathing began to get louder. "I have a feeling the Gamemakers were of the same mind."

"You think they purposely turned up the microphones in the cave?" Effie asked as a tiny cry of pleasure, obviously from Katniss, echoed through their suite. "Oh my word," Effie said as she raised her gloved hand to her chest.

"For Christ sake!" Haymitch threw a sofa pillow across the room. "You want food?!" He screamed at the television set. "Move the damn sleeping bag off of your head!"

"Haymitch, they're allowed a little..." Effie tried to think of a word, but she was cut short by Katniss saying Peeta's name on a willowy sigh.

Haymitch pointed to the screen and said, "They're not allowed one damn thing if they want to eat!"

The sound of heavy breathing and panting caused Effie to flush. "I really think we should respect their wishes and lower the volume down." She picked up the remote control.

"You touch that thing, Effie...so help me God!" Haymitch screamed at her. Haymitch walked closer to the television set and yelled, "Those

idiots! Fools! Your sponsors don't want to *hear* you make up! They want to *see* you! You're killing me here!" Haymitch gripped the back of a chair with his hand and rattled its legs against the floor.

"Haymitch you need to calm down," Cinna said as he stood up and walked away from the set.

"I love you," Peeta's voice was barely above a whisper, but it rang out through the suite. "I love you, Katniss."

"Come on. Say it, sweetheart. *Say it.*" Haymitch willed Katniss.

"Peeta, I..." Katniss' voice was shaking.

The sleeping bag flew off of their heads and Haymitch was thrilled at first until he heard Peeta interrupt Katniss by saying, "Your head is bleeding again."

"Son of a *bitch*!" Haymitch threw his glass of whiskey at the wall.

"Oh, poor Peeta," Effie sighed.

"Poor, Peeta?" Haymitch turned to her. "*Poor Peeta?*" He mimicked her voice. "Damn right poor Peeta! You think I can send them in food after this? Do you have any clue how pissed off those sponsors are going to be about this bull?"

Effie held her hand to her chest and tried to hide her discomfort. The entire scene had left her feeling as though she had been intruding on a very personal moment between Katniss and Peeta. "I'm sure you're overreacting, Haymitch."

"Overreacting?" Haymitch walked to the bar and poured himself another glass of whiskey and downed it, dribbling part of it on his chin.

He wiped it with his sleeve and said, "If those two pull anymore crap like that...we'll be lucky if the sponsors don't pull all of their funds."

"I thought you said the funds were secure?" Cinna asked.

"Nothing's secure until the gift is sent in and I can't send it in until those two..." Haymitch pointed at the television screen. "...give me something to work with." Haymitch scowled and downed another glass of whiskey. "I should've expected something like this from the girl, but the boy...he knows better."

"It seems to me that they wanted a few moments to themselves," Cinna tried to defend Katniss and Peeta's actions.

"We'll see how far that goes when they're so hungry..."

"Haymitch," Cinna interrupted. "*Hunger* isn't always about food."

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They had spent the better part of the day huddled in the sleeping bag, freezing and trying not to think about their grumbling stomachs. At one point Peeta had said, "I'd kill for some bread." He regretted the words the moment they left his mouth.

"We might have to," Katniss said with sorrow in her voice.

"Not sure what we've got to do to get Haymitch to send us some?" Peeta glared across the cave.

Katniss and Peeta looked at one another and came to the same conclusion. They were the Star Crossed Lovers. They knew what they had to do to get food.

Katniss put her hand over her mouth and lifted it up to Peeta's ear. "Maybe I shouldn't have pulled the sleeping bag over our heads last night?" There was sadness in her eyes when she looked at him.

Peeta shook his head and said, "I'm glad you did." She graced him with a tender smile. He trailed a few kisses across her cheek and stopped at her ear. She still hadn't put her hair back in its braid so he pulled it over his lips and said softly in her ear, "I'm sorry." He cupped her cheeks in his hands and kissed her.

They both knew it was for the cameras. Though it was nice, neither of them put their hearts into it. Peeta was the first one to pull away. He combed through Katniss' hair with his fingers and smiled at her, gave her a little shrug as if saying, we tried, then kissed her nose.

Katniss rolled her head back and forth to work out the kinks she felt in her neck then gathered her hair in her hands. She began braiding her hair down the side of her head.

Peeta stared at Katniss as she braided her hair. It brought back a happy memory. "I remember the first time I saw you..." Katniss looked over her shoulder at Peeta and secured her braid in place. "...your hair was in two braids instead of one." Katniss placed her hand in the center of Peeta's chest and smiled at him.

"When was that?" She asked, knowing full well what the answer was.

Peeta gave her a questioning look and Katniss answered by rubbing his growling stomach.

"We were five." Katniss settled herself in Peeta's arms and rested her head against his shoulder. "It was the first day of school and the teacher said, 'Who knows the Valley Song?' and your hand shot

straight up." Peeta smiled down at Katniss. "That was a rough morning for me." Peeta hadn't meant to say that.

"Why?" Katniss asked.

He took a breath and tried to figure out a way of telling her without saying too much. "I had gotten in trouble that morning for something and I had a hard time getting my mind off of it." Peeta remembered that morning as though it were yesterday. He had brushed his teeth and gotten some toothpaste on his shirt. His mother was so angry with him she had spanked his bottom with a wooden spoon and he could barely sit down in any of his classes. He had to keep tucking his hands underneath him to help ease the pain. "Then you stood up on a chair and started to sing and I swear Katniss..." He lifted his hand up and tucked a stray hair behind her ear. "Nothing else existed, but you. Even the birds outside the window fell silent when you sang. And when you finished..." He had a thoughtful expression on his face. "...the mockingjays started to mimic your song." He looked into her eyes and said, "That's when I knew...I was a goner."

Katniss smiled up at him. "You were only five, Peeta." She placed her hand against his beating heart and found comfort in it.

"Yeah, but I still knew I loved you. Then I spent everyday for the next eleven years watching you." He grinned at her.

"So for eleven years you didn't notice any other girls?" Katniss couldn't help the surge of love she felt coursing through her.

"No, I noticed pretty much every girl," Peeta chuckled. "But none of them could hold a candle to you." He put his hand over hers and said, "You were the one that didn't notice me."

"I noticed you, Peeta." Katniss admitted. She had made a vow prior to going into the feast that she would find out about the bread. She knew the Capitol would probably cut the cameras since they'd be talking about her practically starving at the age of eleven, but she didn't care. She needed to know. "We were eleven when I noticed you," she said softly.

"Eleven?" Peeta asked trying to remember. When it hit him he said, "You mean the bread?"

"Mmmm hmmm," she nodded. "I noticed you then and I always wondered what you were thinking...why you did what you did."

"You know why, Katniss."

"That's not what I mean," she clarified. She looked down then back up at him. It would take a lot for him to answer her, she knew, but she hoped he would trust her enough to tell her. "What were you thinking when you did it? Tell me about that day, Peeta. Tell me what was going through your head."

Peeta knew if they spoke about Katniss being so close to starvation, they'd lose all chances of getting food. "Are you sure you want me to tell you *now*, Katniss?"

"Yes. I need you to tell me, Peeta." She lifted his hand and placed a kiss against his fingers. "Please?"

Peeta leaned his head against the wall of the cave and thought about what he was going to do. If he spoke about that day, chances were they'd lose food now. If he didn't tell her, there was a chance they could die before she'd ever get her answer. There was only one thing he could do.

"It was just me and my mom in the bakery that day. My brothers were sick so my dad was upstairs with them." Peeta looked into the distance as he told Katniss what had been going through his eleven year old mind. "I was in the back of the bakery when I heard my mother yelling. Naturally, I thought I had done something wrong, so I ran to her and saw her standing in the doorway screaming at someone outside. At first I was thankful it wasn't me and then I peeked around her legs and saw who it was..." Peeta pulled Katniss closer to him. "You were standing next to our trash cans. I knew what you were doing there. Knew that your dad had just died and that your mom was sick and she couldn't work."

"You *knew* that?" Katniss looked up at him.

"I knew everything about you, Katniss. *Everything*." She put her head on his shoulder. "My mom and I went back into the bakery and I saw you walking away, but it was pouring outside and I was worried about you so I ran to the window and looked outside, but I could barely see. There was ice building up on the glass...it was so cold outside...so cold." Peeta's forehead wrinkled as he remembered Katniss frail body slumping through the frigid rain. "You had fallen down underneath our apple tree." He dropped his head back. "God, Katniss. I wanted to run out to you...to pick you up and carry you home...warm you by a fire...feed you..." Peeta swallowed hard. The memory of seeing Katniss underneath the apple tree hurt him more than his mother's hands.

Katniss could feel Peeta's pain. "You were only eleven, Peeta." She fought back her tears.

"Yeah," He sighed. "I was only eleven, but I still wanted to take care of you and I couldn't. I felt like...like everything was out of my control." He grimaced. "There wasn't a thing I could do for you." He paused and

gave his head a little shake. "Then I realized there was something I had control over. There was one thing I *could* do." Peeta could feel the heat from the ovens of the bakery. The smell of bread seemed to be wafting through the air. "My mother went to the ovens to take out the bread that was finished baking. I told her that I'd do it for her." Peeta clenched his lips then continued. "I took out all of the loaves and put them on the cooling racks, but the last two I..." he gulped. "...I held them over the coals. I knew I had to be careful not to burn the inside of them. Just scorch the outside." Peeta looked down at Katniss with a sad smile and said, "They'd be too damaged to sell and my mom would make me feed them to the pigs." He tried to block out what happened when his mother saw the burnt bread and placed a kiss on Katniss' forehead. "That's what she did too. She told me to go outside and feed them to our pigs. Unfortunately she followed me out there, but someone came into the bakery and the minute she went back inside I threw those loaves to you and ran."

Katniss hugged Peeta's torso. "You got in trouble for burning that bread, didn't you?"

"A little," Peeta lied. He didn't want Katniss to bring it up. He never wanted to discuss what his mother did to him with Katniss.

Katniss swallowed the lump that was forming in her throat. Tears were forming in her eyes. "I noticed you the next day in school." She turned his face to hers. "You had a...bruise." Katniss stared at the spot where Peeta's mother had hit him. She could see the black eye he had received for burning the bread as though his mother had hit him that very day. Her fingertips played lightly underneath his eye. "It was right...here." Her bottom lip began trembling as the tears spilled over her lashes. She tried to form some words, but it was so hard to get them out. She could barely breathe as she asked, "What did she use, Peeta?" Katniss knew his mother hit him with something. There was

no way her hand alone could've caused so much damage to Peeta's face.

Peeta closed his eyes tightly as his tears joined Katniss'. For years he had been hiding the fact that his mother hit him...abused him. Katniss knew, but she never really came right out and asked him about it until now. It took everything he had...every ounce of courage he could muster up to confess, "A wooden spoon."

Katniss felt the breath catch in her chest. She leaned in and placed a kiss on the spot where his bruise had been. "I'm sorry," she breathed against his skin. "So sorry." She dragged her lips across his face and cupped his cheek as she looked into his eyes. "I should've thanked you."

Peeta sniffed and gave her a soft smile. "You just did."

Their lips had barely touched when they heard the loud thump coming from outside of the cave. Katniss grabbed her bow and arrow and Peeta ran to the entrance with the knife in his hand.

"Oh my God!" Peeta called out.

"What?" Katniss stood up, still aiming the arrow at the cave's entrance.

Peeta held up a large woven picnic basket with a parachute attached to it.

Katniss shook her head. She couldn't believe the Capitol kept the cameras on during their conversation. She was certain they would've pulled away. Peeta was already digging into the basket of food as Katniss stood over him. I hope he doesn't think I asked him about

those things so we could get food, she thought. "Peeta?" She pulled him up to her.

"What is it?"

Katniss wrapped her arms around him and held him tightly. She pressed her lips against his ears and covered them with her hand. "I'll never let her lay a hand on you again."

Peeta held Katniss against him and blew out a breath. He pulled back and looked into her eyes. "Thanks to you...neither will I."

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74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Twenty-three: We Always Were

Thanks S for the idea and for your help. Thanks A for correcting me. Thanks to all the readers for reading this. I am thinking about writing through Catching Fire and Mockingjay, but I haven't decided yet. I'm thinking... In the meantime...Go! Read!

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

He sat in the woods, waiting for any sign of game to cross his path. Gale had shot at a flock of birds earlier, but he was so distracted his arrow hit the tree and not the partridge he had aimed for. He couldn't get the sounds of Katniss and Peeta's little tryst out of his head. Gale was about to shut the television set off when they went to bed, but he kept watching, hoping Katniss and Peeta's argument would actually get worse. He was sure he was the only person in the nation hoping for trouble between them, but Gale couldn't help it. He wanted Katniss for himself and he was willing to fight for her. His mother, Hazelle had been right. Katniss went into the Games thinking Gale was her friend. She had no clue how he felt about her, but Gale was sure that once he told her his true feelings, Katniss would see him for more than a friend. She'd see that Gale was the one that had been there for her over the years. Sure, Peeta might have helped her out in the arena, but every single time Gale and Katniss broke the law and entered the woods of District 12, Gale had her back and protected her. Gale helped Katniss to provide for her family, something Peeta never did. Katniss would see this, he was certain of it.

At the first sign of them fighting on television, Gale had actually smiled. When they went to bed for the night, Gale could feel the

tension between them. He hoped the whole country could, and then Katniss pulled the sleeping bag over their heads. At first Gale thought it was because of how cold the Gamemakers were keeping the arena at night, both Katniss and Peeta had mentioned the drastic weather changes, but then he heard them.

Gale sat next to a blackberry bush in the woods of District 12 and picked up a rock. He threw it across the forest and grit his teeth at the memory of the Gamemakers next trick. They had adjusted the sound and lighting within the cave and every little breath, whisper...every noise was accentuated so it could be heard by all of Panem. There was no hiding from the Gamemakers, Gale thought, no matter how hard you tried.

Gale told himself that there was nothing going on. Katniss and Peeta wouldn't be that stupid. They were in the middle of the Games for Christ sake, but then he heard Katniss' voice...her voice when she said Peeta's name. Gale felt a wave of pain and heartache go through him. He could hear Peeta telling her he loved her and that was it. Gale couldn't take it anymore. He stood up to turn the television set off before he heard Katniss' reply, but Peeta had thrown the sleeping bag off of them. Katniss' head had been bleeding again. Gale stood over his family's television set looking down on the screen and watched them with contempt coursing through his veins. That's when he noticed her hair. It was no longer in a braid, but in waves flowing over her shoulders and down her back. She was going to put it back in the braid but Peeta had said something to her and she left it down. Obviously he wanted her to leave it that way because he kept brushing his fingers through it and Katniss curled against his chest and let him. In that moment of time, Gale didn't want either one of them coming back to District 12. He didn't want to see them again, yet he couldn't stop staring at them. Watching them as they fell asleep and cursing Katniss for not keeping watch over their cave.

Gale stayed awake the entire night and kept watch for them as they slept. He was sure they had no clue how often they turned to one another in their sleep and placed kisses against the other. Peeta would adjust his arm, which was underneath Katniss head and he'd lean down and kiss her hair. Katniss would roll onto her side and wrap her arms around Peeta and kiss the middle of his chest. It drove Gale crazy. He wanted to walk away from it, but he couldn't. Someone has to watch you, Catnip, he thought to himself. Cato and Thresh were on the opposite side of the arena and Foxface was in a similar cave about two hundred yards away from Katniss and Peeta. It was tiny, but she was able to stand up in it and walk a little, most importantly, she stayed hidden in it.

He left home and headed for the woods before sunrise with the hopes of clearing his mind, but the solitude of the forest only provided him with time to think...time to dwell on things. Time to relive Katniss calling out Peeta's name and Peeta telling her he loved her. The next arrow he shot was aimed at Peeta. He walked to the dead rabbit and picked it up by its ears. He yanked the arrow out of its body and smiled.

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Portia sat at their table with a drink in her hand, studying Katniss and Peeta on screen. They were huddled together in the cold cave. Trying to stay warm and dry, but the Gamemakers were making it very difficult by increasing the rainfall almost every hour on the dot. They hadn't eaten in almost twenty-four hours and though Haymitch secured funds for their food, Katniss and Peeta's actions the night before seemed to give some of the sponsors cause for concern. They weren't really playing the Games by the rules.

"Haymitch, I simply don't understand why they didn't think to remove that covering so the rest of us could see. Surely they knew we'd be watching," Lola complained.

"The girl said it herself, it was cold in there. They're probably freezing." Haymitch tried to make up an excuse.

"Think the lovers were looking for a way to keep warm?" Maximus said with a lecherous grin.

"Personally, I think they did it on purpose." Haymitch wanted to smack Lola silly after he heard that from her.

"I do too," Effie made an attempt to save the day. "I think it was very...mysterious of them to act the way they did." Effie fluttered her lashes and lifted her fingers to her throat. "I don't know about you, but leaving things up to the viewer's imaginations...sheer brilliance. Not to mention...very..." Effie grinned at the group of sponsors that paid for the picnic. "...very intriguing."

"I will give them that," Carter Darlinton, one of the sponsors said. "They had me guessing what was going on under that sleeping bag, right up until the very end."

"And it did give Lola and I something to talk about, didn't it?" Quillan put his arm around his wife's waist.

Haymitch smiled a devilish grin in Effie's direction and said, "I know I was...intrigued." Effie smirked in Haymitch's direction at his comment.

"What are the Games about if not a little mystery?" Asked Effie. After a few more minutes of building up Katniss and Peeta's ingenuity Effie joined Portia at their table. "Are you sketching something for Peeta?" Effie noticed the pad and pencil in Portia's hand.

"I've been trying to for days, but..." Portia shook her head. "I just can't seem to get it right. Cinna and I keep designing things for both of them, yet the designs seem to be out of place. As if they were drawn for someone else."

"May I look at them?"

"Of course," Portia opened up her book and flipped through the pages to show Effie a few of the items she designed for Peeta's return.

"And these are all for the night they're crowned?" Effie asked.

"Yes...well..." Portia flipped through to an earlier drawing. "Not all of them. Some of them I just...had an idea and went with it, but I don't think they'd suit Peeta."

"Mmmmm..." Effie went through the pages fairly quickly and closed up the book. "It seems to me that you and Cinna did fairly well with the fire motif. Plus everyone adored it."

"Effie, after they win, they'll no longer have to be on fire. Neither one of them will need to draw in sponsors. In fact, I'll bet they'd rather skip the entire crowning of the Victor and go straight home." Portia tapped her pencil on the edge of the table.

"How did you and Cinna come up with those costumes for the Tribute Parade?" Effie crossed her legs and studied Portia. "They were brilliant."

"Hours and hours of studying flames." Portia smiled. "And thank you for the compliment, though much of it should go to Cinna."

"Pish posh," Effie turned the corner of her mouth in a wry grin. "I think we all know; behind a great man is a greater woman." She leaned

back and glanced at Haymitch as he laughed with their group of sponsors. "Of course not all of us are blessed with a great man to stand behind. Some of us are stuck with a drunken ass." Effie got a disgusted look on her face and a chill up her spine.

"Haymitch isn't all bad, Effie." Portia tried to hold back her smile. "He's really come through for Katniss and Peeta this year."

"Yes...well...I suppose he was due for a winner. It has been over two decades since District 12 has had one."

"And now they're gonna get two, sweetheart!" Haymitch leaned over Effie's shoulder and part of his drink spilled on her shoulder.

"Can't you act like a human being for once instead of a...a...booze hound?" Effie wiped her blouse with her napkin.

"This is my first drink!" Haymitch called to her as she shoved him out of her way and headed back to their suite. The moment she was out of sight he turned to Portia and said, "What the hell did I do?"

Just as Portia was about to tell Haymitch he should be a little nicer to Effie she noticed a flicker of something at the table behind him. She stood up and walked to it, picked it up and brought it to their table. Her eyes were focused on the color it was projecting against the table. She began scanning the room. Why hadn't she noticed this sooner, she thought to herself. The entire event center had been illuminated with candles. They were everywhere.

"What did you do to Effie?" Cinna asked Haymitch as he sat down. "I just saw her and she's not too pleased with you right now."

"Is she ever pleased with me?" Haymitch smirked.

"Portia?" Cinna noticed the strange look on her face. "Portia?" He said louder.

"Candlelight." Portia smiled at Cinna.

"What about it?" Cinna asked her.

"We've been trying to build up the romance between Katniss and Peeta." Portia's eyes were a glow. "When you think of romance...what kind of fire comes to mind, Cinna? The burning of hot coals? Or the glow of a candle's flame?" Portia lifted her eyebrow up in an enticing manner. "We need to do some redesigning, Cinna." Portia glanced up at the television screen and saw Katniss and Peeta huddled together in their sleeping bag. They looked weak, cold and hungry. Peeta bent his head down to hers and began kissing Katniss. Portia smiled knowing, they wouldn't stay hungry for long. She wished she could tell Peeta that she and Cinna were thinking about him. Both of them. She wished there was a way she could let Katniss and Peeta know they were right there with them every step of the way.

"Looks like they might be working on getting some food for themselves," Haymitch said quietly to Cinna and Portia.

"Haymitch?" Portia's tone was soft. "When you send in the basket...do you think you could send a message to them for us?" Portia took Cinna's hand in hers. "We'd like them to know they've never left our thoughts."

"How am I supposed to do that?" Haymitch asked her as though she were crazy. "It's against the rules for personal messages to be sent from anyone other than the mentor."

"No one would have to know," Cinna suggested. "It could be...in code."

"And when did those two become experts in code breaking?"

Haymitch finished his drink and stared at the stylists. "Okay...what do you want me to tell them? If I can make it sound like it's coming from me then I might consider it." Portia squeezed Cinna's hand in hers and whispered into Haymitch's ear. Both Cinna and Portia laughed when they saw the quizzical look on Haymitch's face. "You want me to say that?"

"Yes," Portia smiled. Cinna nodded at her, knowing full well what it was Portia asked Haymitch to tell Katniss and Peeta.

Haymitch shrugged a shoulder and said, "Don't see how that can hurt. Okay."

"You may have to get ready to send that picnic in pretty soon, Haymitch." Cinna gestured to the television screen which had been shared by Cato making his way to the Cornucopia but was now completely monopolized by Katniss and Peeta.

"We were five. It was the first day of school and the teacher said, 'Who knows the Valley song?' and your hand shot straight up." Peeta and Katniss' faces were beaming at one another on the Capitol's television screens.

Haymitch looked up at the largest screen in the room and thought, time to set a new record. He walked out of the Capitol's party and listened to the televisions that lined the hall as he headed towards the control room allowing him to send out gifts to his tributes.

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Gale had found himself staring off into space more often than not during the course of the day. He tried to keep in mind what his mother had said to him, Katniss expected him to be her friend while she was gone and he didn't want his mother to see him wallowing about. She hadn't been privy to Katniss and Peeta's vocal exploitations during the night and he didn't want to explain it to her. He did his trades somewhat backwards that day. Starting at the Hob and working his way towards the square so he could watch the large television screen there. By the time he got to town the sun was setting and it was probably too late to knock on the Mayor's door. He hadn't eaten for hours so he made himself a little meal out of the berries he had planned on selling and a few greens. Everything left in his game bag was items that were safe to have around the Peacekeepers if they decided to go through it. Thread, material, and greens you could get from the market, but Gale got them from the woods and a few other things he traded for at the Hob, but nothing illegal. As he walked towards the square he noticed the two blond headed women walking several yards ahead of him. "Prim? Mrs. Everdeen?"

"Gale," Katniss' mom turned around and waited for him.

"Hi, Gale." Prim smiled.

"What are you two doing out here?" He was surprised they weren't home.

"It's not good just sitting about the house. Katniss would want us to get out, right Prim?" Her mother tried to smile, but the confidence she had displayed when discussing Katniss' injuries, was nowhere to be found.

"Yes. She'd be awfully mad if she found out how long we've been in our house without leaving." Prim took her mother's hand in her own. "So we're going into town to watch the big screen for a little while."

"Just until the anthem, then we'll head back home." Katniss' mom said.

"Mind if I walk with you?" Gale had to keep his steps small so the women could keep pace with him.

"That would be nice," Katniss' mother was doing her best to keep her spirits up, but Gale could tell it was taking a toll on her.

"Have you been watching it today?" Gale asked.

Prim nodded. "Thresh and Cato found each other when we left home."

Gale understood why the women seemed so forlorn. Once Thresh or Cato was dead, the survivor would start to hunt down Katniss. "Let's hope, for Katniss' sake, Cato kills Thresh. I think he's more of a danger to her than Cato." He knew Katniss would have a hard time killing the tribute from Eleven considering she'd already saved his life and he hers.

Prim and her mother nodded their agreement. They saw Cato, on the giant television screen, walking back towards the Cornucopia in the rain, wearing some form of body armor. His face was bleeding and he was limping. Behind him he was dragging several backpacks and in his other hand he had his sword. "I guess we know who won." Prim said with sadness in her voice. Katniss and Peeta's images were displayed on the other half of the television screen.

"It's like night and day, isn't it?" They all turned when they heard the baker's voice. "That boy from Two is struggling to keep himself together." His eyes focused on Cato. "He hasn't had a thing to eat in over a day, he's fighting for his life...fighting the same battle as the rest of them and look at him..." Cato was screaming out his own praises regarding his fight against Thresh, into the night. Waving his

sword and jumping when he thought something was behind him. "He looks like he's on the verge of a breakdown. Then you've got our kids," the baker put his hand on Katniss' mother's shoulder for a brief second. "Fighting the same fight. Battling the same Gamemakers...same tributes. They haven't eaten in almost a day and look at them...that's what Victors look like." The baker smiled up at the screen. "Don't know about you, but I'm proud of the example our kids are setting."

Prim smiled and forgot that Cato was on television. Katniss' mother said a soft, "Thank you," and watched her daughter deal with the Games like a Victor.

Gale felt out of place as the baker spoke about Katniss and Peeta. He stood to the side and tried to concentrate on Cato, who was acting like he was losing touch with reality, but Peeta kissed Katniss and the reaction from the crowd surrounding them was impossible to block out. Some people cheered, many let out oohs and aahs followed by sighs. Some of the women blushed, some of the men encouraged Peeta on and Gale wanted to throw something through the large screen. Gale noticed Peeta's father looking at his son with pride on his face, Gale wanted to tell the man to wipe the look off of his face and then he saw the way Katniss' mother was looking at the pair. She had that same soft expression that Katniss had that day he came upon her in the woods.

"You and dad used to act like that, mom." Prim gave her mother a squeeze and her mother smiled down at her and nodded. "Peeta's great, mom. I bet Katniss can't wait to introduce you to him."

"I remember the first time I saw you...your hair was in two braids instead of in one." Peeta smiled at Katniss as she finished weaving her hair down her shoulder.

"When was that?" Katniss leaned against him.

"We were five." Gale watched as Katniss' face lit up when Peeta began telling her his story. "It was the first day of school and the teacher said, 'Who knows the Valley Song?' and your hand shot straight up. That was a rough morning for me." Why? Gale wondered, because you were five and you lived in town and you had a full belly unlike those of us from the Seam?

"Why?" Katniss asked.

"I had gotten in trouble that morning for something and I had a hard time getting my mind off of it." Gale gave Peeta's father a quick look, wondering what Peeta had done to get the baker angry. The man always seemed so mild mannered. "Then you stood up on a chair and started to sing and I swear Katniss...Nothing else existed, but you." Was this scripted? Did Haymitch tell Peeta to say this before entering the Games? Gale asked himself. Katniss doesn't sing. To Gale's knowledge, she never had. But what about the song she sang to Rue, he wondered? She sang to Rue. "Even the birds outside the window fell silent when you sang. And when you finished...the mockingjays started to mimic your song." He looked into her eyes and said, "That's when I knew...I was a goner."

"You were only five, Peeta." Katniss spoke softly to him.

"Yeah, but I still knew I loved you. Then I spent every day for the next eleven years watching you." Peeta grinned at her and Gale found a small amount of pleasure knowing that Peeta was probably jealous of him as Gale and Katniss developed a friendship while Peeta stood in the distance and watched.

"So for eleven years you didn't notice any other girls?" Katniss asked.

"No, I noticed pretty much every girl." Everyone in the square laughed, including the baker, at Peeta's admission. "But none of them could hold a candle to you. You were the one that didn't notice me."

"I noticed you, Peeta." Katniss had that look on her face again. No, Gale said to himself, none of this was made up by Haymitch. They were talking from their hearts and it drove him insane. "We were eleven when I noticed you."

"Eleven?" Had Katniss been aware of Peeta's feelings for years or had Peeta done something else to catch her attention? Gale's mind seemed to be racing. "You mean the bread?" Peeta asked.

"Mmmm hmmm. I noticed you then and I always wondered what you were thinking...why you did what you did." Gale stared at Peeta wondering what the baker's son had done to have made such an impact on Katniss that she'd bring it up so many years later.

"You know why, Katniss."

"That's not what I mean. What were you thinking when you did it? Tell me about that day, Peeta. Tell me what was going through your head."

"Are you sure you want me to tell you *now*, Katniss?"

"Yes. I need you to tell me, Peeta." When Katniss kissed Peeta's hand, Gale clenched his in a tight fist. "Please?" She begged Peeta.

"It was just me and my mom in the bakery that day. My brothers were sick so my dad was upstairs with them. I was in the back of the bakery when I heard my mother yelling. Naturally, I thought I had done something wrong, so I ran to her and saw her standing in the doorway screaming at someone outside. At first I was thankful it wasn't me and then I peeked around her legs and saw who it was...You were

standing next to our trash cans. I knew what you were doing there." So did Gale. If Katniss was going through the trash cans of the town's people, there could be only one reason for it. She was searching for something to eat. He expected the television coverage to end, but it didn't. "...knew that your dad had just died and that your mom was sick and she couldn't work." Gale's eyes flashed to Katniss' mom. She was holding onto Prim's hand with tears in her eyes.

"You *knew* that?" Katniss seemed surprised.

"I knew everything about you, Katniss. *Everything*. My mom and I went back into the bakery and I saw you walking away, but it was pouring outside and I was worried about you so I ran to the window and looked outside, but I could barely see. There was ice building up on the glass...it was so cold outside...so cold. You had fallen down underneath our apple tree." Gale could see the pain in Peeta's face as he continued. "God, Katniss. I wanted to run out to you...to pick you up and carry you home...warm you by a fire...feed you..."

Katniss' voice was trembling when she said, "You were only eleven, Peeta."

"Yeah," He sighed. "I was only eleven, but I still wanted to take care of you and I couldn't. I felt like...like everything was out of my control." Peeta paused before saying, "There wasn't a thing I could do for you. Then I realized there was something I had control over. There was one thing I *could* do." Gale wondered what a child of eleven could do to help Katniss at that point in her life. Catnip had told Gale that her family was on the brink of starvation prior to her going into the woods to hunt and gather for food. "My mother went to the ovens to take out the bread that was finished baking. I told her that I'd do it for her. I took out all of the loaves and put them on the cooling racks, but the last two I..." Gale could hear Peeta swallowing. "...I held them over the coals. I

knew I had to be careful not to burn the inside of them. Just scorch the outside." Peeta deliberately burned bread? Why would he do that? Gale couldn't understand his actions. "They'd be too damaged to sell and my mom would make me feed them to the pigs. That's what she did too. She told me to go outside and feed them to our pigs. Unfortunately she followed me out there, but someone came into the bakery and the minute she went back inside I threw those loaves to you and ran." Gale's jaw dropped when he heard Peeta's confession. He had burnt the bread for Katniss. So he could feed her. So he could feed her family.

"You got in trouble for burning that bread, didn't you?" I bet he got in trouble for it, thought Gale. Food was a sacred commodity, even those that lived in town knew better than to waste it.

"A little."

"I noticed you the next day in school." Katniss turned Peeta's face to hers. "You had a...bruise." Gale began shaking his head. He looked at the baker and thought; surely you didn't hit him for burning bread? "It was right...here." Gale watched Katniss trail her fingers underneath Peeta's eye. She kept swallowing and moving her lips as though she wanted to say something, but no sound was coming out. "What did she use, Peeta?" She? What did *she* use? My God, it wasn't the baker. It was the witch. Gale couldn't seem to catch his breath as he took the information in. Peeta was beaten for feeding Katniss by his own mother. He looked at the baker and saw the man's face covered in tears.

"A wooden spoon." Peeta's words were quiet, but damning.

"My God," he heard Katniss' mother say.

The baker's head was hanging. His hands were wiping the tears away from his eyes.

"I'm sorry. So sorry," Katniss was crying as was Peeta. She was trailing kisses from under his eye to his jaw. Gale looked down at his feet then back up at the screen. "I should've thanked you."

Their faces were drenched in tears as Peeta smiled at her. "You just did."

Katniss' mother turned to look at the baker and Gale wondered what she was thinking about the man. Gale stared at him and felt a form of pain he had never felt in his life. Hours ago he was wishing death on Peeta Mellark. Now...now he wanted Peeta's mother to suffer. "Did he know?" Gale asked the baker. The question was drowned out by the cheers from the crowd surrounding them. Katniss and Peeta had received a basket of food, but Gale didn't care. He wanted to know the answer to his question. He stepped closer to the baker and asked him, "Did Peeta know he'd get in that much trouble for burning some bread?"

Katniss' mother, Prim and the baker all stood in a small circle looking at Gale. "Yes," the baker answered.

"And he did it anyway?" Prim's tiny voice spoke up.

"Yes," the baker's eyes dropped. "My wife..." he shook his head. "She never deserved to have Peeta as a son."

"He was eleven years old. What kind of kid does that?" Gale asked as he stared at the television screen. Katniss and Peeta had forgotten about their food and were holding onto one another for dear life.

"The same kind that breaks the Capitol's laws to feed her family," Katniss' mother answered with pride. "The bravest."

The baker sniffled and said, "He's always watched out for her."

Gale felt as though he had no clue who Katniss or Peeta were. He had assumed Peeta was like all the rest of the kids from town and disregarded those thoughts the longer the Games went on, but feelings of resentment and jealousy continued to cloud his judgment of Peeta. Katniss had spent years knowing what Peeta sacrificed for her...for her family and never said a word about it. Why? He wondered. Why didn't you ever say anything, Catnip? He looked up on the screen and saw them clasping each other's hands as they sat down to their long awaited meal. Peeta tucked some hair behind her ear and said something to her, but Gale couldn't hear a thing. While everyone around them celebrated the feast that Katniss and Peeta were about to partake in, the baker, Katniss' mother, Prim and Gale stood in their tight little circle and shared sorrowful looks. It didn't seem to register with anyone the gravity of what Peeta did for Katniss. "How many times has he saved her?" Gale spoke his thoughts out loud.

"Too many to count, Gale." Prim answered. The adults just looked at the small child. "Peeta has been doing things for our family for years," she admitted.

"Like what, Prim?" Her mother asked.

Prim smiled and said, "He's helped me collect things from the meadow and when you needed syrup to make cough medicine last winter..." Prim gave the baker a bashful glimpse. "...he gave it to me for you, mom."

The baker looked away. "How would he be able to get a hold of such a thing?" Her mother asked. She saw the blush creep up on the baker's face and knew the answer. Peeta and his father had both been taking care of their family. "Thank you," she reached out her hand and touched his arm. "That medicine helped a lot of people."

The baker nodded his head and said, "Peeta mentioned you needed it."

"How did he know?" Gale asked.

"I told him," Prim lifted her chin up high. "How do you think he kept informed about Katniss?" She flashed a bright and proud smile.

"What would make you do such a thing, Prim?" Her mother was taken aback.

"Peeta gave me something a while back...something..." Prim smiled and bit her bottom lip in a manner just like her older sister.

"...something very special. Afterwards we became...sort of...friends."

"What did he give you?" Gale asked.

"I can't tell you." Prim clasped her mouth shut.

"Well, you can tell me. I'm your mother."

"Sorry, mom. I can't."

"And why not?" Her mother gave her a stern look.

"Because I don't want Peeta getting in trouble with Katniss," Prim raised her eyes to the television set and grinned. "They seem happy, don't they?"

"Prim?" Her mother gave her a warning stare. "I want you to tell me what Peeta gave you."

"I can't mom," Prim said as she watched Katniss and Peeta laughing together. "But I promise, when they get back, I'll ask him if I can tell you and if he says yes, then I'll be more than happy to *show* you exactly what Peeta gave to me."

"It's not illegal is it, Prim?" Gale asked with concern in his eyes.

"Peeta? Give me something illegal?" Prim chuckled. She leaned over to Gale and said, "That's what we have you for."

But they didn't have to wait for Peeta and Katniss to return to District 12 to find out what Peeta had given to Prim. They all stood around and listened as Peeta made another confession to Katniss later in the night.

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"Oh, it's lamb stew...and wild rice!" Katniss looked up at Peeta as he spread out the thin checkered blanket, Haymitch provided for them inside of the basket. "Peeta, I can't believe this. Look at all of this food." She sat back on her haunches.

"Forget the food," Peeta took out one of the plates and said, "Check out the detail on this china. It's..." Peeta turned the plate around in a circle and blew out a little breath. "...it's stunning."

"Peeta, it's a dish." Katniss rolled her eyes at him. "Here," she handed him a small bread plate. "If you want to play with the plates, play with the small one so we can eat off of the big ones."

"Very funny, Katniss." Peeta picked up the tiny plate and admired the hand painted item. "Look at this, Katniss." He moved to sit next to her and pointed at a spot on the plate. "See this?"

"Yeah," Katniss dished out a little bit of food on each of their plates. "What about it?"

"Someone painted that on here. They took the time to duplicate the larger plate, but you can see, right here..." Peeta squinted. "This is how you know it was done by hand. This little swirl here." Peeta picked up a piece of his roll and took a small bite. "That's from the tip of a paintbrush."

Katniss raised her eyebrows at him and laughed. "It's a plate!"

"It's superb," Peeta put it down. "It's art."

Katniss took a bite of her lamb stew and stared at Peeta. "We're in the middle of the Hunger Games. *Hunger Games*. We haven't eaten since yesterday. We've got three other tributes hunting us down. Gamemakers providing us with challenging weather and we're living in a cave."

"What's your point?" Peeta took a mouthful of the stew and savored the flavor it.

"My point is..." Katniss sighed. "You are the most incredible person I've ever met in my life. Somehow through all of this...you can find beauty and I don't know how you do it."

Peeta tugged on the end of her braid and said, "Beauty is easy to find when you're surrounded by it."

Katniss turned away from him and felt a blush creeping up her cheeks. They ate slowly and Katniss challenged him to find something artistic within the confines of their cave. "Okay mister artist. Show me one thing in here you'd consider art. Bet you can't do it."

Peeta grinned. "This whole cave is art."

Katniss threw her head back and said, "Ugh! It's dirty and disgusting. Where's the beauty in that?"

Peeta sat straight up next to her and said, "Point something out."

"Huh?"

"Point something out in here that you think is dirty...or disgusting and I'll show you how to turn it into art."

Katniss surveyed their surroundings and pointed to a leak in their cave's wall. "That right there."

Peeta looked at it from his spot next to Katniss and took a sip of water. "What do you see there?"

"I see a leaky rock." Katniss knew there was no way Peeta could find something unique enough about it to find it artistic.

"Hmmm..." Peeta scooted closer to her and lifted his hand. "See the way the water drips down the sharp edges of the wall there?" He pointed at it. "The darker tones of the wet stones compared to the dry ones? And look how the light reflects off of the droplets of water."

Peeta turned to Katniss and lifted the corner of his lip in a small grin. "You have a very artistic eye, Katniss."

She stared at the leaky wall. "How do you do that?" Peeta laughed at her. "Seriously?" She turned to face him. "It's a bunch of rocks with water dripping on it and you found..." Katniss glanced back at it and noticed the sharp angles of the rock that Peeta had pointed out. The different colors of stone. She stood up and walked to it, placed her hand next to it and found herself mesmerized by the moonlight reflecting off of the water that fell from it. "...it's exquisite, Peeta."

Peeta stood in front of her and tucked a piece of loose hair behind her ear. He looked right at her as he said, "It's the most exquisite thing I've ever seen." He dipped his head down and placed a soft kiss against her lips. With his eyes closed he said, "Breathtaking." Katniss placed her hands on his shoulders and bestowed upon him a smile and a sigh. Peeta opened his eyes and told her, "This is by far the best date I've ever been on."

Katniss chuckled at him and took his hand. "Let's finish eating." She sat down and began nibbling at the rest of her food, even though she wanted to devour it, and took note of something he said. "How many dates have you been on, Peeta?"

"Do lunches count?" He dipped his roll into the gravy from the stew and ate it.

"Yes," Katniss smiled.

"Then countless dates."

"And how'd it work out for you...those dates?"

Peeta grinned and said, "I never got to kiss the girl at the end of the date. Shame too...she was awfully pretty."

Katniss shook her head and placed a kiss on his cheek while he chewed. "Stupid girl." With a coy smile she said, "Play your cards right and you might get another one at the end of this date."

Peeta waggled his eyebrows at her and said, "Why don't we skip the whole end of the night thing and you can just kiss me now?"

"Because...Katniss wiped up the last of the stew from her plate with her roll and ate it. "I haven't decided if you're getting one yet." She said with a full mouth. "Oh, I can just hear Effie Trinket cringing at my manners right now."

Peeta laughed and ate the last of his stew. "Watch this." He picked up his plate and licked the gravy off of it. "Sorry, Effie. It's just so good."

Katniss laughed at him and offered him her plate. "Wanna lick?"

"Nope, that's yours." Peeta urged her with his eyes to copy his actions.

Katniss shook her head and licked her plate. They both began laughing as Katniss said, "Yup, she's cringing. I can feel it from here."

"We miss you, Effie!" Peeta called out.

Katniss found herself agreeing with Peeta. There was something about the woman's determination Katniss admired. She wondered if Effie was sitting back and enjoying the Games with the rest of the Capitol residents or if she was helping Haymitch. Katniss looked at the plates, the utensils and all the little nuances that came with their meal. Something told her that Effie Trinket had just as much to do with their picnic as Haymitch.

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Haymitch shook his head as he listened to Peeta telling Katniss what he did for her when they were eleven. Haymitch had wanted them to earn their sponsor gift, but as he listened to them speak; he knew nothing he sent into the arena could make up for all that Katniss and Peeta went through in their lives. The more Peeta spoke, the more Haymitch wanted a drink. He stood at the console waiting to push the button that would send their picnic into them and closed his eyes. The moment he heard Peeta say he intentionally burnt the bread, Haymitch knew that the kid probably took a beating for it. His mother was known for her bad temper when it came to Peeta. She never tried to hide it. She always put on a smile for her customers or anyone that might appear to be important, but he had never seen the woman grace Peeta with one. The worst part was that no one, including Haymitch, ever did a thing to help the kid out. They all just expected the woman to yell at the boy. Over the years, the woman's screams towards Peeta, were a given. Haymitch didn't blame himself; he didn't know the baker's family. He just bought the occasional sweet from them when he was running low on alcohol. His body craved the sugar. He lifted his eyes to the television screen and felt a stab of pain shoot through him when Katniss told him she was sorry.

"I'm sorry too, kid." Haymitch said under his breath as he pushed the appropriate buttons to send them their food. He walked out of the control room and headed for the suite, but stopped himself, knowing if he had gone there he'd drink himself into oblivion. He needed to go to the party and make sure the sponsors were happy with the delivery of their gift.

He walked into the Capitol's party and put all morose thoughts to the back of his mind. Everyone in the room was celebrating, but for Cinna and Portia. They were sitting at their table and Haymitch could see

Portia wiping her eyes. There were a few tears around the room, from those that were caught up in Katniss and Peeta's romance, but Portia's were genuine and they weren't for a pair of Star Crossed Lovers. They were for a little boy that spent his life taking a beating from his mother.

"I actually told him she must be wonderful, Cinna." Portia dabbed the corner of a napkin at her eyes. "And he laughed...he laughed at me and said thank you."

"It's okay, Portia." Cinna rubbed her hand. "How were you to know?"

"I'll never forgive myself for saying that to him."

"Portia, he thanked you. Peeta thanked you after you said that. Obviously you said the right thing at the right time." Cinna tried to ease Portia's pain. "When he comes back, if it makes you feel better, you can tell him you're sorry, but I promise you, Peeta won't have given it a second thought."

Haymitch walked up behind them and said, "Where's Effie?"

"She never came back," Cinna told him.

Haymitch nodded and said, "I sent your message." Haymitch patted Portia's shoulder and headed towards the group of sponsors who were bragging about the amount of money they spent on the romantic picnic currently being shared by Katniss and Peeta. Haymitch spent as little time as he could with them, congratulating them on setting a new record for the most expensive gift ever received in the Games. "I have no doubt that gift will hold the record till the end of time...or the end of the Games. Whichever comes first." Haymitch chuckled, thinking the end of the Games will be more likely, and accepted handshakes from the sponsors.

He walked into their suite, expecting it to be empty. The room was dark, but for the television set which was never turned off. Instead he found Effie standing at a window sniffing and wiping her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Went to the party. Thought you'd be there to celebrate Katniss and Peeta breaking the record," Haymitch poured a tall glass of whiskey and a glass of brandy for Effie without asking. He handed it to her and saw her face streaked with tears.

Effie took the glass and sipped at it. Sounds of Katniss and Peeta laughing filled their room. "What kind of mother does that?" Effie asked quietly. "A mother is supposed to protect her child from harm. Love them and keep them safe. Not hurt them." A fresh round of tears began burning Effie's eyes.

Haymitch looked out the window and thought of the people at the party. The residents of the Capitol were oblivious to Peeta's abuse. All they heard when Peeta spoke was a little boy's attempt to take care of his young love. His family owned a bakery; naturally he could provide bread for her. A gift for his sweetheart. Haymitch didn't know why he expected them to react to the news that Peeta was given a black eye by his own mother for doing it. Those people celebrated the deaths of dozens of children each year, so what was beating a child to them? Who cared about that? Haymitch noticed Effie's crying reflection in the window and realized that she did. "Effie, we live in a world where children get sent into an arena to fight to the death..."

"That's different!" She turned on him and pointed to the screen. "Those are the Games. They go into those knowing full well their lives are on the line."

"And you think that excuses it?" Haymitch didn't raise his voice to her, but he was upset.

"No. No I don't." Effie dropped her hand and her voice. "But a child shouldn't have to spend their entire life living in fear."

"News flash, Effie? Every single child in every single district spends their life in fear. Fear that their name will be called out and they'll be in the Games." Haymitch said.

"And their parents share that fear, but did Peeta's?" Effie turned back to the window and stared out. "Did his mother even care that I called out his name?"

"Probably not, Effie." It was hard for Haymitch to say it, but he was sure it was the truth. "The woman never really cared much about Peeta."

"You knew this?" Effie turned to him. "You knew about this?"

"Not exactly," Haymitch held his hand up in defense. "We've only got one bakery in Twelve and we're not a very big district. Rumors tend to spread."

"And no one did a thing about it?" Effie shook her head in disbelief. "How could no one...not even his father do anything about it? Unless his father partook in this sort of behavior as well?"

"No. The baker's a good guy."

"Not good enough!" Effie drank her brandy in one swallow. "If he were then he would've defended his son and not let that woman lift a hand to Peeta!" Effie turned to Haymitch and said, "And I don't think it's just physical, Haymitch. You heard what she said about Katniss winning the Games. She had more faith in a stranger than her own child."

Haymitch lifted his hand to his face and rubbed his brow. It was hard for him to understand Effie's anger. Up until this year, Effie had been like everyone else at the Capitol and now she was torn apart by the fact that Peeta's mother hit him and possibly caused mental abuse as well. Haymitch found it hard not to laugh at the naive conclusions she was coming to. "Yeah, she probably caused him some mental anguish over the years too."

"And if he wins these Games? Then what? She'll just take his money...live in his home..." Effie began pacing, she was furious with Peeta's mother. "I won't have it, Haymitch! I won't!"

Haymitch couldn't hold back the laugh that escaped from his throat. "And what are you going to do about it? You're not his mother. She is."

"Well..." Effie pursed her lips and said, "He's sixteen. He can live on his own if he wants. I'll just help him to see that's what's best for him and Katniss."

"Yes. Katniss." Haymitch put his hand on Effie's arm and stopped her from wearing a hole into the carpet. "Do you think for one minute that Katniss would let his mother hurt him again?"

Effie stopped short and looked up at the television screen. Katniss and Peeta were laughing as they cuddled together in the sleeping bag.

"No," Effie shook her head and smiled. "No, she wouldn't." Effie felt a surge of excitement run through her. "Katniss would shoot her dead if she tried to hurt one hair on Peeta's head." Effie had a gleam in her eye and wished for a minute that Peeta's mother were in the arena.

"That's right." Haymitch heard Katniss say his name and turned to see what was being said about him.

"Haymitch. How do you think he won his Games?" Katniss asked Peeta.

Effie picked up the remote control and for the first time since the start of the Games she shut the television set off. She walked to the bar and refilled their drinks. She lifted her glass and said, "To putting Finnick's trident to rest once and for all."

Haymitch gave her a cocky grin and said, "He's going to be pissed when he finds out, you know?"

"Oh, please Haymitch." Effie took a sip of her brandy. "Let me be the one to break the news to him."

Haymitch let out a belly laugh and said, "You earned it, Effie. What do you say we head back to the party and you can share the good news?"

Effie's eyes lit up as she said, "Let me freshen up first. I want to look my best when I tell that womanizer our lovebird's dinner cost more than his little pitchfork."

As Haymitch waited for Effie to return an attendant entered their suite with a note for him. "Hey, Effie!" Haymitch called out. "How do you feel about joining me for an interview with Caesar Flickerman?"

Effie adjusted her clothing as she walked into the main room of their suite. "Why on earth would an escort join a mentor for an interview?"

"Just thought you'd want to break the news to Finnick about the trident, on national TV." Haymitch lifted the corner of his mouth and waggled his eyebrows.

"I am quite photogenic, you know?" As if to prove it, Effie flashed one of her famous smiles.

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Peeta stared out the cave's entrance and tried to make out what he saw in the sky. "Katniss."

"Want to share another roll?" She was portioning out a second helping of food for them. "I think we should."

"Katniss," his voice got louder.

"What?" The smile she had on her face dropped the second she saw the expression on Peeta's face. "What's wrong?"

"Thresh is dead."

"He can't be," Katniss scrambled to the cave's entrance to see Thresh's image fading into the night's sky. "No," she couldn't believe it. "He was so strong, Peeta."

Peeta could see the turmoil Katniss was going through, but he was grateful they wouldn't have to kill the boy that saved Rue...that saved Katniss' life. As much as he hated it, he had to put Katniss' mind back in the Games. "That means Cato is alive and he'll be hunting us again." Peeta could see the pain registering on Katniss' face. "Look, with Thresh gone, that means we're one step closer to home." He held her unresponsive hand. Come on, Katniss, he thought to himself. Snap out of this.

Katniss nodded her head and felt anger surging through her at Thresh's death. The Capitol killed him. Murdered him and Rue.

"Yeah...home," she wished she were there right now so she could curl up in a ball and cry.

"Come on," Peeta stood up and led her to their picnic. "Let's eat while it's still warm." Katniss picked up her spoon and let it drop to her plate. "You all right?"

"Yeah. It's just...if we didn't win, I wanted Thresh to win. For Rue." There was an edge to Katniss voice. "You can bet Cato will be hurt though."

"And he'll have supplies again." Peeta worried.

"Why do you think that?" Katniss asked.

"You think he didn't take what he could from Thresh?"

"No." Katniss ate a spoonful of stew without thinking. "You're right."

"So are you...I'm sure Thresh didn't go down without a fight. Cato's got to be wounded and the more injured he is, the better it is for us." Peeta squinted and asked, "I wonder how Foxface is doing?"

"Oh she's fine," Katniss sneered. "It'll probably be easier to catch Cato than her." Katniss took another bite of food and made a face. It tasted like glue.

Peeta could see the worry in Katniss' features. They had a brief respite from the Games while in their cave, but he knew, come morning, the Games would be back on. For now though... "Did I show you the note Haymitch sent in?"

"No," Katniss could care less what sarcastic comment Haymitch decided to send into them.

Peeta took the note out of the basket and handed it to her. "Read it."

"You read it," Katniss' mood was going from morbid to anger and back again.

"Just open it, Katniss." Peeta shoved it in her hand and watched as she opened the tiny envelope.

Katniss rolled her eyes and ripped the thing open. She read it twice before it registered who had sent the note. It wasn't from Haymitch, but Cinna and Portia. *"You're sitting by an oak tree..."*

Peeta watched as Katniss' face changed from anger and despair to hope. "Thank you," Katniss looked straight ahead and spoke to her friends that were rooting for them at the Capitol. "This is just what I needed."

Peeta sat next to her and picked up a piece of her roll and fed it to her. "Eat. You need food too."

Katniss had wanted to take the first watch, but Peeta insisted he do it. In a way she was grateful. So much had happened in the past few hours and she needed to put her thoughts in order, but they were scrambled. One minute she'd think about the note they received with their food, then her thoughts would switch to the death of Rue and Thresh and then they'd flash to Peeta's mother. She'd give anything to have the witch standing in front of her at that moment. Thoughts of sending an arrow through the woman's heart, wrong as it may be, kept popping into Katniss' mind. "Peeta, I can't sleep." Katniss sat up and looked at him as he sat close to the cave's entrance with the knife in his hand.

"You need to, Katniss." His eyes were focused on the forest just beyond the rocks that hid them from sight.

"No. I can't." She crossed her arms in a defiant gesture.

Peeta glanced back at her and laughed. "You look like a spoiled little girl who didn't get her way." Katniss scowled at him. Peeta stood up and walked to her. "Come on," he sat on the outside of the sleeping bag and placed an arm around her. "It's story time."

"A story?" Katniss was not in the mood to keep Peeta entertained. "I don't think so."

"Well, I do." He kissed the top of her head. "Besides, I think you'll like this story." Peeta glanced down at her and said, "It's about a...very ugly kitten I found."

"An ugly kitten?" Not Buttercup, she thought "Peeta?" Katniss glared at him.

Peeta smiled and started talking. "I went to feed the pigs one afternoon and I heard this noise coming from under the bakery. It was a tiny little meowing sound." Peeta turned his attention to the cave's opening and stared at it. "When I looked underneath the steps of the bakery I saw this kitten. It was hurt," he smiled when he remembered the first time he laid eyes on Buttercup. "It had obviously been attacked by an animal and was barely alive, but I knew District 12 had a healer and lucky for me...I went to school with her daughter." Peeta squeezed Katniss' upper body in a hug and pulled his gaze away from the opening of the cave. "The only problem was, I was afraid to talk to her. See..." he looked into Katniss' eyes. "...I was crazy about her and petrified that she'd find out about my feelings for her."

"Oh, Peeta. Don't tell me it was you..."

"Shut up and let me finish my story, Katniss." Peeta grinned. "Luckily the healer had two daughters and the youngest one was walking by

the bakery as I pulled the kitten out from under the steps." Peeta remembered how nervous he had been when he walked up to Prim with the little cat. "Prim, I said, do you think you can help me?" He felt Katniss' hand run up and down his leg. "She took one look at the cat and said, you're kitten doesn't look too good, Peeta." He chuckled. "That's why I need your help, I told her. I have no clue what to do for it. I told her where I found it and what I thought happened to it and she asked, can you bring it in your house? I told her I couldn't have a cat in a bakery, so she told me to try and keep it hidden until she got back." Peeta remembered taking the cat into the back of the bakery and hiding it on the shelves behind the cake decorating items. "As soon as she came back to the bakery and I saw her looking into the window, I snuck the cat to her and she went to work on it." Peeta was still amazed at how skilled Prim's little hands were when taking care of the cat. "She cleaned it up, bandaged it and fed it milk from a baby bottle. We put it back under the stairs, inside of a box, hoping it would stay safe until one of us could check on it again. Each day Prim would stop by and take care of the kitten and one day, she says to me, he's better Peeta, but what are we going to do with him?"

"Oh, Lord," Katniss sighed and rested her head against Peeta's chest.

"I told her, Prim, why don't you take him home? She was sure you'd say no though, but I convinced her that you wouldn't." Peeta smiled down at Katniss as she looked up at him. "Prim, I said, Katniss loves you. She'll let you keep the cat."

"Peeta, I hate that cat," Katniss sat up next to him and ran her hand down his cheek. Oh, how she loved this boy, she thought. He had given her and her family food, comfort and joy.

"Yeah, but you love Prim." He said with a knowing grin.

"Yes. I do." Katniss leaned in and placed a kiss on his cheek. "Thank you."

"What was I supposed to do? Let the kitten die?" He tried to make an excuse, but he knew Katniss would see right through it.

"How many times have you altered my life, Peeta Mellark? How many times have you changed my life for the better without me knowing about it?" She curled herself into him and closed her eyes. All thoughts of Thresh, Rue and Peeta's mother were gone. In its place was an image of Prim holding Buttercup. Stroking the cat's fur.

"That cat still comes to visit me. He won't leave until I pick him up and pet him." Peeta admitted.

"He lets you pick him up?" Katniss' eyes were getting heavy.

"Yeah, why?"

"No one can touch that cat except for Prim." Katniss could feel sleep taking her over. "Prim and you..."

Shortly after she had fallen asleep, Peeta placed her head down and tucked the sleeping bag around her. He kissed her forehead and said, "Goodnight, Katniss."

Katniss woke up to the smell of goat cheese. "Prim?" The smell brought her back home to her sister's goat and the cheese that she made out of the animal's milk.

"No," Peeta kissed her head. "Peeta. But I can see how you'd mistake us. We're both quite good looking."

Katniss opened her eyes and giggled as she took a bite out of the roll topped with cheese and an apple slice that Peeta had been holding in front of her. "Prim makes goat cheese," she said with a full mouth.

"I'd like to try some of that. Now move over. I'm tired." Peeta crawled into the bag as Katniss got out.

She took her station at the cave's entrance with her bow and arrows at the ready. "Get some sleep. I'll wake you at first light."

"Sooner if you need to," Peeta yawned.

Katniss stood guarding their home. Within an hour she watched as one second the rain was coming down in buckets and the next it stopped. The Gamemakers were at it again. She could feel her nerves on edge. She wondered if Cato was making his way to their hideout or if the Gamemakers stopped the rain so the tribute from District Two would have an easier time recuperating from the injuries Thresh had surely given him. When the sun began to make an appearance she woke Peeta up. Time to hunt, she thought. She went to shake his shoulder, but the sound of a little snore escaped from him. She bit her bottom lip and tried not to laugh. She found his features to be endearing. "So you're a snorer?" She whispered. "How did I not notice that these past few nights?" She leaned down and placed a kiss on his slightly parted lips. "Wake up." She knew she shouldn't be letting her guard down, but his mouth was too tempting.

Peeta opened his eyes and saw silver ones staring right back at him. "Do I have to?" He pulled her closer to him.

"Yes. We're wasting hunting time." Katniss leaned in and gave him a long and drawn out kiss.

"If that's considered wasting time...I'm all for it." Peeta stretched and rolled his neck in a circular motion. Time to face the day, he thought. "So we're going hunting? Do we do that on an empty stomach?"

Katniss had a feeling keeping Peeta full when they got back home was going to be a chore. "Nope. We're going to stuff ourselves for staying power."

They finished the rest of the stew, but saved the apple, cheese and roll for later in the day. They packed up all of their belongings and replenished their water supply then headed off into the woods.

"Katniss, I'm not much of a hunter."

"I'll hunt. You cook." Katniss was scanning the woods for game, but Peeta's heavy steps were scaring them off. "Peeta? Do you think we could walk without our shoes and socks on?"

"In the woods?" Peeta wasn't really crazy about the idea.

"It'll help to hide our tracks from Cato."

"You can bet he's on the hunt for us right now. He's not one for sitting around and waiting for prey to walk by." Peeta sat on a rock and removed his shoes and socks.

"Walk on the rocks as much as you can," Katniss warned him. "Keep an eye out and make sure you listen for both of us."

"Okay," Peeta had forgotten about her hearing loss.

They walked for almost two hours before Katniss said, "Peeta, you have to try to move more quietly." Even with her deaf ear, she could hear Peeta coming a mile away. "Forget Cato, you're scaring off every rabbit in a ten mile radius."

"Really?" Peeta looked down at his bare feet and said, "Sorry. I didn't know. Told you I wasn't much of a hunter."

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure it's just your bad leg." Or the fact that you've lived in town your whole life, she thought. Oh, Peeta, when we get home the first thing I'm going to teach you is how to tread lightly.

They went on for another hour before Peeta said, "We need to split up. I'm chasing away all the game."

"No," Katniss turned to him. "We're not splitting up. I'll get something. Don't worry." She couldn't leave him vulnerable for Cato.

"Katniss, I can gather some things while you hunt."

"You won't know what to gather," She almost sounded like she was whining.

"I have an idea of what to look for." Peeta remembered some of the things Prim had showed him in the meadow and along the edge of the fence that separated District 12 from the woods. "Besides, I'm sure the Gamemakers have put a bread bush out here for me," he grinned.

"That's not funny." Katniss said quietly, but with frustration in her voice. "What if Cato finds you? Then what?"

"I'm not afraid of Cato. I can handle him." Peeta stared her down.

Katniss' eyes flashed to the cut in Peeta's leg. The need to keep Peeta safe from Cato was overwhelming. "What if you acted as my lookout?"

"What if I go gather while you hunt?" He mimicked her voice. "Come on," He smiled at her. "Just don't go too far."

She didn't want to do it, but Katniss caved in. "Okay." She looked around for the mockingjays that were hiding in the trees. "Every few minutes send out a whistle." Katniss came up with a sound that could've easily been from one of the strange birds that inhabited the Gamemakers forest. "This way I know you're all right."

Peeta let out a whistle that matched Katniss' and said, "We'll meet by this boulder in a half an hour. Be careful, Katniss." He squeezed her hand.

"You too," her chest ached as she watched him disappear into the bushes. In no time at all she shot two rabbits and a squirrel. She let out a whistle to tell Peeta she was all right and headed back to their meeting place. There was no reply. She whistled again and started walking faster towards her destination. Still she heard nothing in response. She saw the sheet of plastic from their backpack with the apple, cheese and some berries on it. A small piece of cheese was missing and the berries weren't the same ones from Rue's bush.

Katniss picked up the berries and looked at them. She heard her father's voice speaking to her, *"Not these, Katniss. Never these."*

"Peeta! Peeta!" She ran through the bushes...the trees. Not thinking about the noise she was making. She was answered with the sound of a cannon. "Peeta! PEEEEETA!" She screamed out as she ran into him.

"Is it Cato?" Peeta began looking from side to side. "Hide Katniss. Hide."

She saw the clump of berries he held in his hand and smacked them down to the ground. "That's nightlock, Peeta! You'd be dead in a minute!" She threw her arms around his neck and tried to control her sobbing.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know." Peeta squeezed her and held her close. "I didn't know." He could hear her blubbering in his ear. "Shhh...I'm okay." He stroked her hair. "I'm sorry."

She was certain the sound of the cannon had meant Peeta's death. When her father died she didn't think she could ever experience that kind of pain again. The sight of the deadly berries and Capitol's signal that a tribute was killed was torture for Katniss. The death of her father was the most traumatic event she'd ever gone through...until she thought that Peeta had died. More pain and sorrow washed through her in that moment, than she could ever imagine. Her heart was overflowing with grief at the thought of having to go on without Peeta. Living without him was unfathomable. The rush of emotion that went through her when she held him against her, shook her to her senses. "I love you, Peeta." She kissed his ear. His cheek. "I love you," she choked out between cries.

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Peeta cupped her cheeks and pulled her face away from his in order to look into her eyes. Was this for the viewing audience or was it real? He wanted desperately to ask her. "Katniss?"

She gripped the back of his jacket and saw the question in his eyes. She needed to tell him...to let *him* know how she felt. "Read my lips, Peeta." She mouthed the words, "I love you. I love you."

The lack of sound coming from her told Peeta what he was desperate to know. Katniss wasn't playing a part as a Star Crossed Lover, she was telling him and him alone how she felt. "I love you, too." he mouthed back.

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were Chapter 24: The Finale, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Twenty-four: The Finale

The Games are coming to an end. Do you know what creatures are coming after the tributes? Think again! Thanks to S and A for all of their hard work. Thanks for the great reviews, but more importantly, thanks to all of you for reading!

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

As much as Peeta wanted to stand there and revel in Katniss' profession of love, he couldn't help but worry about their situation. "Katniss, Cato could be here any second."

Katniss wiped her tears off on her sleeve and tried to get her emotions in check. She lifted her bow and arrow and aimed it around the woods. "Come on," she led them to the food Peeta had left out by the rock and looked around the forest. "It wasn't Cato."

"How do you know?" Peeta stood with his back to hers, holding the knife out in front of him.

"Because the apple didn't eat the cheese, Peeta." She took a few steps into the bushes and saw the girl lying dead on the ground. "Foxface did."

"But how?" Peeta glanced down at the dead girl then back up to the woods. Katniss bent down and saw the berries in her hand. She lifted them out of the girl's palm and held them up to Peeta. "You mean..."

Katniss could see the shock on his face when he came to the realization that he caused the girl's death. "She stole food from the Careers when they weren't looking. Not a lot. Just enough to get by."

"So she stole the berries from us?" Peeta was having a hard time accepting the girl's demise. The killing of other tributes wasn't something he was new to, but it was something he hated doing. Taking another person's life was a thing he'd never grow accustomed to.

"Yes. She was clever, Peeta. She probably thought they were safe since you had them with the rest of our food." Katniss held the nightlock in her hand and looked down at the bunch of berries.

"Get rid of those things, Katniss." Peeta ordered her.

Katniss lifted an eyebrow and said, "Peeta, you said Cato knew Rue's berries were safe right?"

"Yeah," Peeta couldn't take his eyes off of the tiny red headed girl. Her lips were blue. Her tongue swollen.

"Maybe, Cato will think these are the same ones?"

Peeta stared at her and said, "It can't be that easy?"

"Why not?" Katniss put the berries in her pocket and walked away from the body so the Capitol's hovercraft could collect the girl. She stopped when she noticed Peeta standing over Foxface.

Peeta bent down and whispered, "I'm sorry." He stood up and joined Katniss. They took hands and walked into the woods waiting for the removal of another tribute. "Katniss?" Peeta said quietly. "Cato knows where we are now. He'll have seen the hovercraft. He'll know we killed her."

"Good," Katniss stepped out from behind the bushes after the hovercraft departed. "Let him come."

"Are you ready to face him?"

"I'm ready to eat," Katniss started gathering wood for a fire. "Let's cook our food while we have the chance. He already knows we're here and that we've killed Foxface. That means he knows you're better and

we're not hiding." Katniss threw the sticks into a pile and said, "So light a fire and let's invite Cato to dinner."

"Think that's wise?"

"Would you come if it were you, Peeta?"

He lifted the corner of his mouth into a grin and said, "Probably not."

"My point exactly," Katniss held out her game and said, "I hunted. You cook."

Peeta built a fire and began preparing the rabbits Katniss skinned and cleaned for roasting. "Is this how our relationship is going to work? You hunt, I cook?" They sat with their backs against each other, by tactic agreement, watching the woods for any sign of Cato.

"Hey, I made you soup." She gave him a playful nudge with her elbow.

"That's true. And it didn't suck too badly either," Peeta chuckled.

"Shut up and cook baker boy." Katniss let herself smile for a brief second and kept her good ear and eyes aware of their surroundings.

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Haymitch swirled the ice around in his glass and tried to relax as he watched Katniss and Peeta in the woods. Cato had been heading straight for them until the cannon fired. He stopped in his tracks and waited for the removal of the body. Haymitch knew the boy was hoping it would be either Katniss or Peeta by the way he reacted when he saw the glimpse of red hair being loaded into the hovercraft. Cato slammed his sword into the ground and took a few steps forward. "Go

ahead," Haymitch said to the screen, encouraging Cato on. "Let's get this over with." He was confident Katniss and Peeta would kill the boy with or without body armor. But Cato stood back and waited. When he saw the smoke from their fire Haymitch saw fear in the tribute from District 2's eyes. Katniss was right. Cato knew they were on the hunt...together, and that Peeta had recovered. Cato moved away from the direction of the fire and began walking towards the Cornucopia. Had the boy still been hungry, Haymitch was sure he would've gone towards the smell of the food, but he got a loaf of bread from some sponsors after killing Thresh. "Damn," Haymitch muttered to himself. Now Katniss and Peeta were headed back to their cave. Far away from Cato, but Haymitch knew the end of the Games would be near. They'd never be far enough away from the Gamemakers.

"Is your leg okay?" Katniss asked Peeta.

"It hurts a little, but I'm fine." He answered.

"How's your head?" Peeta asked as he crawled into the cave.

"Going a mile a minute right now," Katniss answered.

"Mine too." Peeta pulled her against him for a hug. "We've got to be extra careful tonight."

"I know," Katniss nodded against his chest. They stood that way for several minutes before Katniss said, "We're almost home, Peeta."

Haymitch couldn't believe how close they were to the end of the Games, but he had been part of this event for too long. He knew the Gamemakers would be pulling out the big guns within the next day or two. He had been tempted to track down Plutarch to ask him what the plan was, but Haymitch didn't want to know or threaten Plutarch's cover. At this point, there was nothing more he could do for Katniss or

Peeta in the Games. Now Haymitch had to concentrate on the aftermath of being a Victor and how he could help his kids through it. So far Katniss had shown herself as a force to be reckoned with, but there were times when she would let her guard down and Peeta in. Those moments were rare, but when they occurred, they made a strong impact on the people around the Capitol. On the people of the nation. Peeta had proven himself to be heroic. Willing to die...to kill for Katniss' survival. His selfless acts hadn't gone unnoticed. Mentors from several districts had stopped by Haymitch and passed on secure messages, words that most people wouldn't think twice about, but Haymitch knew was code for something more. Katniss and Peeta had become more than just a couple of tributes in love. They were exactly what Haymitch had told Seneca Crane they'd be. Something you want to root for. The districts were cheering them on and not just as possible Victors of the Hunger Games. Would they be able to stand up to the real Games, Haymitch wondered. The arena would never prepare Peeta and Katniss for what was next. Victory.

"I think Peeta would love her in it," Portia said as she walked into the room.

"It's not very flashy," Cinna grinned liking the idea of the simple design he came up with for Katniss.

"No, it's very subtle...romantic."

"Like candlelight," Cinna smiled. "And not at all like Katniss." He and Portia chuckled.

"What's up?" Haymitch turned to them.

"Just discussing what Katniss and Peeta should wear after they win." Portia took a seat next to Haymitch. "Take a look," she handed him a sketchpad that had side by side outfits on the pages.

"This looks fine for Peeta, but Katniss?" Haymitch looked at the soft yellow dress Cinna had sketched. "She'll look like a little girl in tha...she'll look like a little girl..." Haymitch gave Cinna a nod of his head. "Peeta will love that on her." And President Snow might not be so threatened by a petite little girl in a modest yellow dress. Haymitch was too aware of the Capitol's vengeance on tributes that didn't play the Games by their unspoken rules. Kill the tributes. Save your life, but don't make them look bad or stupid in the process or you'll pay. Though they hadn't come right out and defied the Capitol, Katniss and Peeta most certainly, weren't playing by the rules of the Capitol.

"That's what I was thinking," Cinna raised his eyebrow in a conniving way. "It has a certain innocence about it, don't you think?"

Portia crossed her legs and sat back on the sofa. She took in the image of Katniss and Peeta on the television screen and smiled as she heard them speaking. "Peeta's going to adore her in that dress, Cinna. The whole nation will."

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She loved him. Though Gale had gone back and forth with the idea that Katniss was faking her romance with Peeta for the Games a million different times, there was no denying it now. She told Peeta she loved him.

Gale had been going through his own little personal hell since hearing about the things Peeta had done for Katniss over the years. He expected the people from District 12 to hold a grudge against the baker's wife, but Gale noticed a crowd at the bakery as he passed it on his way to the butcher shop. He was repulsed by the way people had responded to the woman's punishment of Peeta. They acted as

though nothing was wrong, but Gale couldn't pretend. He couldn't put the thought of a young Peeta Mellark getting hit with a wooden spoon out of his mind. It made him cringe.

Gale no longer felt hatred for Peeta or Katniss. During the Games he didn't understand what Katniss saw in Peeta. Now Gale knew. Peeta helped her family survive and that's all that mattered to Katniss.

Survival. He got it now, but Gale also knew that he helped her family too. Even though Katniss had said she loved Peeta, Gale held onto the hope that the further she and Peeta got away from the arena and the closer they got to District 12, the more her feelings would wane and she'd see Gale as the one that had been there for her and not hiding in the shadows.

He made his trades with Rooba, the butcher and took his money to the Hob. He kept himself silent on his journeys that day. When he sold Madge the strawberries, he barely said a word to her. He avoided the bakery, due to the crowd, but he did notice Peeta's mother smiling both times he passed the place. Gale had seen the baker's wife yell at the baker too over the years. He wondered if Peeta's father or her other sons had ever been subject to the witch's abuse? At this point, Gale didn't care. He had too many people to worry about. He couldn't add anymore onto his plate.

As he headed towards his house he tried to hide the turmoil he was going through. His mother hadn't said anything to him about Katniss and Peeta since she yelled at him the other day and he was in no hurry to be on the receiving end of a lecture again so he wiped off the downtrodden expression he had been carrying all day long and entered.

"Hi," Gale walked in and put the game bag on the kitchen table. His family was sitting around their television set. "What's going on?"

"Peeta killed Foxface," Rory told him.

Gale was surprised to hear this. "How?"

"Nightlock," Hazelle answered. "It was an accident. He hadn't meant to kill her, but she stole some of their food and Peeta picked some night lock by mistake, thinking they were the same berries he had been lying by in the mud."

"Doesn't he know what nightlock is?" Gale sat on the sofa and watched as Katniss and Peeta headed towards their cave.

"Guess not," Rory answered. "He's from town. How often do you see nightlock in the market?"

"Yeah. I suppose," Gale mumbled.

"Cato's the only one left," Hazelle put her hand on Gale's leg. "They'll have to figure out a way around that body armor the Capitol gave him in order to defeat him though."

"His head isn't protected," Gale said as he leaned back against the cushions. "One more to go," he said to himself. And then she'll be home. What then? How are you going to make her forget about Peeta? As the night wore on, Gale answered his own questions. He watched Katniss and Peeta carefully while they were in their den. He listened to Katniss and came to a painful conclusion; he couldn't make her forget Peeta. All he could do was tell Catnip how he felt and hope for the best.

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"We're almost home, Peeta." Katniss pulled back and looked into Peeta's eyes.

"Yeah," he bent down and placed a light kiss against her lips. He had been dying to do that since she told him she loved him. "Katniss? Will you..." he didn't know how to ask her.

"Will I what?"

"Can you say it again?" Peeta blushed when he asked her.

Katniss cupped his cheeks in her hands and said, "I love you, Peeta." She kissed him. "Very much."

Peeta closed his eyes and rested his head on her shoulder. "That's all I've ever wanted. My whole life...all I ever wanted to hear was those words coming from you."

"You can hear them as often as you want," Katniss rubbed her face against the back of his head.

"I'll want to hear it a lot, Katniss." Peeta had barely heard the words growing up. His father had told him on occasion, but that was it.

"I love you," she whispered to him over and over again until he lifted his face to hers and kissed her.

"I just didn't think it was possible for you to...for *anyone* to..." Peeta let his sentence trail off.

"Anyone to? To what, Peeta? Love you?" He had been surrounded by friends every time she saw him in the halls at school. He was one of the most popular boys there. She had assumed he lived a soft life, coming from town, but she had been so wrong about him. She didn't know one thing about him until their first lunch together. "You know,"

she took his hand and walked him to the corner of the cave. She took out their sleeping bag and threw it open then pat the spot next to her so he'd sit down. "I think you're the one that doesn't realize the effect you have on people." She held his hand in hers. "I know plenty of people that care about you. I bet all of Panem is in love with you," she smiled. "And for good reason too. You're an amazing person, Peeta. Trust me, I know." Katniss put her head on his shoulder and said, "Do you think I'd fall in love with just anybody?"

Peeta thought of Gale. "I can think of a few guys that have had their eyes on you over the years."

"They can keep their eyes on me all they want. They don't stand a chance." Katniss knew her words were being heard all over the country. They were being heard by Gale. Though she hadn't wanted to show this part of her relationship with Peeta, she knew it was unavoidable. Peeta's mother had done enough damage to him, and Katniss knew she'd spend the rest of her life, making up for it. She was sorry Gale would have to hear what she was about to say, but when it came right down to it, she had told Peeta she'd always choose him over Gale and she was currently choosing Peeta. "There is no one in this world that I could ever love the way I love you. And that's not because you wrote a letter to our teacher or gave my sister a cat...though I still don't know if I've forgiven you for that one..." She grinned at him. "...and it's not because of what happened when we were eleven either. It's because of who you are right now and the person I become whenever I'm with you." Katniss looked at the bow and arrow lying by her feet. "If I was in this arena with anyone, and I do mean *anyone* else, from our district, I'd never have come back here tonight. I'd have climbed up a tree, and fought that person until they agreed to do it too and if they didn't. Too bad for them." It was hard for Katniss to say these things about herself, but it was the truth.

"I don't believe that for a second." Peeta said.

"Believe it. I came into these Games with one goal in mind. To win for my sister." Katniss lifted Peeta's hand to her lips. "And no matter how much it hurt me, I couldn't let anything stand in my way. So yes, I would've fought to hide in a tree because that's where I'm comfortable. Where I feel safe."

"Why didn't you say so? I would've tried to sleep in a tree..." Katniss put her fingers over his lips.

"I had no intentions of asking you to do that. Not with you still recovering from Cato's sword. Besides, there's no tree in this world that can make me feel as safe as your arms." Peeta kissed the fingers she had against his mouth. "My whole life, I put my family ahead of everyone...then I met you and for the first time in my life I've found something to live for. *Me*. I'm not living my life to take care of my family anymore. I'm living my life because I want to. Because the thought of waking up and seeing you smile at me makes my heart flutter." Peeta rested his head against hers. "Because when I hold your hand, I feel like it's an extension of me. Like you're a part of me and I don't want to live my life without you in it." She paused and said, "You have an enormous effect on me, Peeta. You've changed me for the better." She cupped his cheek and said, "I might have entered these Games intending on winning for my sister, but now...even if I die, I'll be all right with that, because I was loved by you and you allowed me to love you back." She placed a kiss against his lips and whispered, "I would die for you, Peeta. Not out of obligation, but out of love."

Peeta felt like a new person. Like all the years of self doubt had been washed away with her words. "I'd die for you too."

"I know you would." They hugged for a few moments until Peeta pulled away from her.

"But if it's okay with you, Katniss...I'd rather we both walk out of this thing as Victors." He gave her a cheeky grin.

"That's my plan," She picked up her bow and arrows and said, "Let's wait for the anthem, then I'll take first watch tonight." Peeta agreed to it, he was exhausted and couldn't keep his eyes open much longer. Katniss tucked him into the sleeping bag and kissed him on the forehead. "I love you." He was asleep before she got the words out, but he knew. He'll always know, Katniss vowed.

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The betting was getting hot in the Capitol and the team from District 12 could barely stay amongst the crowds at the party. Effie noticed Haymitch's hand shaking on occasion and brought him a drink, but he never drank it. "Cinna," she turned to the stylist. "Take him back to the suite and pour the damn whiskey down his throat if you have to," she said quietly. Effie kept up appearances for their group while the other three took shelter in their suite.

"Effie Trinket, you striking creature."

Effie tried not to roll her eyes at the sound of Finnick Odair's voice. "Why hello, Finnick. I haven't seen you at all during the Games this year." Thank God, she thought.

"Too bad for you, huh?" Finnick ran his hand around Effie's waist. "Nice interview you and Haymitch did with Caesar."

"Thank you. I thought it went off without a hitch," she stepped out of his grasp.

"I'm sure you did." Finnick licked his lips and Effie, try as she may to avoid it, shuddered her response.

"I must go. Enjoy the remainder of the Games." Effie felt Finnick lift her hand to his lips then he flipped it over and flicked his tongue against the inside of her wrist. She could feel one eye closing and the other twitching as her lips pursed. "Thank you," Effie pulled her hand from his grasp. "Now I'll need to take another shower." She could hear Finnick's laughter as she left the party and headed to their suite.

"I thought you were going to stay out there for awhile?" Haymitch asked Effie as he sat with a glass of whiskey in his trembling hand.

"I was and then....Finnick Odair happened." She stormed past him.

Haymitch chuckled and said, "Finnick's not a bad guy, Effie."

"Then I'm sure you won't mind if he licks *your* wrist the next time we go into the party?" Effie walked by Haymitch on her way to freshen up and noticed his glass shaking. "Have you had anything to drink yet or are you still trying to stay sober?"

"He hasn't had anything to drink," Cinna answered.

"For criminy's sake." Effie took the glass out of his hand, pinched his nose shut and poured the drink into his mouth, spilling the majority of it down his chin. "Now you can either drink the next one on your own, or I'll be forcing you to drink that way for the remainder of the Games." Haymitch was in such shock he barely moved. "I'm going to clean up. When I get back, you better have a fresh shirt on and a glass of

whiskey in your gut!" As she stormed out of the room she rambled, "I'm sick of having to keep this team on its toes!"

Portia clamped her lips shut and tried to hold in her laughter. "I had no clue; Effie was the glue holding us together."

Haymitch stood up and poured himself a glass of whiskey and drank it down. "Well, she is." He drank another. "I'm gonna change and then we're all going back to the party. The Gamemakers should be making their play any minute now."

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"Ready?" Katniss asked Peeta.

"Yeah." He answered. "It wasn't much, but it was home for awhile," Peeta said with sorrow in his voice.

Katniss nodded her head and said, "Yeah, I know."

They stood at the entrance to the cave and looked around the rocky structure. It had been almost a full day since Foxface died. Katniss and Peeta had spent that time eating and getting as much rest as possible. Now it was time to face Cato.

The first thing they noticed when they left the cave was the lack of water. "They want to force us together," Katniss said as she dipped down and felt the dry riverbed.

"The lake. That's where they want us to go." Peeta looked around with unwavering eyes.

"Maybe the ponds have some water left?" Katniss asked, but she knew they wouldn't.

"If you want to check, we can." Peeta continued to keep himself on alert.

"Might as well," Katniss kept her bow loaded as they walked through the woods towards the ponds, which were bone dry. "You're right. They want us at the lake."

"Let's go to the lake then."

Katniss walked a few steps ahead of him then turned around. They stood a few feet apart, staring at each other. This was it. They both knew it. They could feel it. Each one of them took a step and rushed into the other's arms. They stood that way, holding onto each other. Neither one of them wanted to move, both knowing they had to. Peeta cupped her cheeks and Katniss mirrored him.

"I love you," he mouthed.

"I love you," she mouthed back.

They shared one last lingering kiss and Katniss felt as if she were at the start of the Games once more. Peeta kissing her, staring into her eyes and telling her he loved her. Only this time she returned his words...his love, unconditionally. They pulled apart and Peeta trailed his hand down her braid. Katniss eyes followed his fingers as he made the familiar gesture which she had come to adore.

She nodded at him, took a deep breath and let it stoke the fire in her belly.

He returned her nod and thought, this time Cato; I won't have tracker jacker venom coursing through me to keep me from killing you. "Let's do this," Peeta said.

"Let the Games begin," Katniss said with verve. "Let them begin for real."

The Star Crossed Lovers of District 12 may have entered the Games, but Katniss and Peeta, girl *and* boy on fire, were determined to leave them.

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They stood at the lake, refilling their water bottles when the sky got unnaturally darker.

Peeta looked around the woods and said, "What's going on?"

Katniss looked up at the sky and said, "It's the finale."

Haymitch gripped his glass of whiskey in one hand and the edge of the table with another.

Effie reached out and clasped Portia's hand in hers. The two women exchanged quick glances before looking at the screen.

Cinna held his chin up high and watched as Cato busted through the trees and was followed up by a creature he had never seen before.

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Hazelle held onto Gale's hand as they listened to Katniss sing Rue's four note song to the mockingjays by the lake. Peeta smiled at her as he filled their water bottle.

"What's going on?" Peeta asked.

"It's the finale." Hazelle squeezed Gale's hand when Katniss answered Peeta.

Gale was petrified. He wanted to run from his house and hide in the woods. Hide from what was about to happen. His mother jumped when Cato ran through the trees towards Katniss and Peeta.

"Shoot him, Katniss!" Gale called out, but his words were silenced when he saw what Cato was running from.

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Peeta bent over to fill the water jugs and heard Katniss singing out a little song. He smiled up at her when he noticed the birds had stopped to listen to her sing too. "They still fall silent when you sing."

"That's Rue's song." Katniss bent down and took a bottle from Peeta then handed him another.

"Sing it again," he filled the last of their water bottles and reveled in the piercing clarity of her voice. "What's going on?" The sky, which had been light out a second ago, turned dark.

Katniss felt her heart race as she answered him. "It's the finale." The mockingjays had just been mimicking Katniss' song, but their melody turned to shrieks in an instant.

Peeta and Katniss jumped to their feet, both ready to battle Cato, who had broken through the trees and was heading straight for them. Katniss shot an arrow directly at his heart, but it bounced off of him and onto the ground. Cato screamed and ran past them for the Cornucopia.

"He's wearing some type of body armor!" Peeta called to her. Then he saw the blood drain from her face.

"Peet...P...Peet..." Katniss began to stumble backwards at the first sight of the Gamemakers' final act.

Peeta turned his head and saw the creatures that were coming for them. "Run, Katniss!" He turned to her and watched her as she followed Cato to the Cornucopia. "RUN!"

74th Hunger Games

Challenge: We

Always Were Chapter

25: Nightlock, a

hunger games fanfic |

FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Twenty-five: Nightlock

Wow...I can't believe this story is almost done! HUGE thanks to my betas S and A. They're awesome! A, thanks for making me laugh. S, thanks for making me think. To all of you that continue to read and review, I thank you. Now...

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

Haymitch stumbled backwards at the first sight of the creatures running after Katniss and Peeta. A pack of Capitol's mutations, mutts for short, were converging on the three remaining tributes as they ran to the Cornucopia for safety. "Sweet Jesu..." Haymitch felt his legs give out as he collapsed into a chair behind him.

New bets starting flying around the Capitol's party, people wagering on which tributes would survive the Gamemakers newest twist. The Star Crossed Lovers weren't getting good odds.

"She hardly has any arrows left." Haymitch felt someone slap him on the back and laugh, "Should've sent her in some of those instead of the food." He wanted to break the man's hand. To turn around and leave the commentator in a bloody pulp, but Haymitch couldn't

move...couldn't breathe. There was something about the mutts...something familiar, but he couldn't place it. The creatures ran on four legs, were covered in different colored fur and varied in sizes. One of them stopped and stood on its hind legs and waved the rest of them on. It was covered in dark brown fur. Its eyes were surrounded by gold. Haymitch could swear he had seen the mutt before.

He watched as Katniss scrambled to the top of the Cornucopia, away from the pack of deadly animals. Cato was at the tip of it, doubled over, trying to catch his breath. Peeta was still trying to get up the side of the metal object. Katniss took an arrow out and aimed it for Cato's head when the sound of Peeta's scream resonated through the party.

"No," Portia felt herself trembling with fear at the sight of Peeta in such grave danger. She whispered, "Climb."

Effie squeezed the stylist's hand in her own and closed her eyes. She couldn't stomach what was about to happen. She couldn't watch Peeta be torn to shreds by the mongrels the Capitol had created to entertain the viewers.

"Climb, Peeta!" Katniss was screaming at him and leaning over the edge of the Cornucopia in a frantic attempt to pull him up to her. "Climb!"

Effie felt a shiver run down her spine as she heard the sound of sharp objects scraping along the Cornucopia's metal surface.

"What?" Katniss yelled out.

"He said, 'Can they climb it?'" Effie's eyes flew open at the sound of Peeta's voice. He was on top of the Cornucopia with Katniss, but now they had dangers to face below them *and* across from them. Cato.

Haymitch stayed focus on the mutts trying to get to the top of the Cornucopia. They were all the same type of mutt, but none of them looked alike except for two in particular. There were two of them that almost looked like twins. Sandy colored, wavy fur and their eyes were unmistakably blue. "My God," Haymitch was sure he was about to vomit. "His brothers," he spoke his thoughts aloud.

Effie glanced at Haymitch to see him drained of all color. "They'll be fine. They'll be fine," she chanted quietly to him.

Haymitch stared at the screen and shook his head. One of the mutts, a slender one with a powdery colored coat was making a running jump for the end of the Cornucopia. Its four inch razor sharp claws hung onto the edge of the metal structure in an attempt to pull itself up. The camera showed it baring its teeth at Katniss.

Katniss stood with her bow and arrow in her hand and took aim. She didn't shoot at the mutt right away. She stared at it and Haymitch stared with her. It was as if they had both come to the realization at the same time. The powdery colored fur should've been the first hint. But it was the long pink eyelashes that gave it away. Haymitch and Katniss said what they were thinking at the same time, "Effie." Then Katniss released the arrow into the mutt's throat.

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Peeta ran as fast as he could, on his bad leg, towards the Cornucopia. He had to get away from the animals that were hunting them down. He didn't dare look back at them; even a split second could mean the difference between life and death. Katniss' feet were dangling off the edge of the Cornucopia. She was scraping to get to the top. "Go, Katniss!" He screamed out. He reached her and pushed her feet

upwards so she could get to safety. His hands reached up and he began pulling himself up, but he could hear the creatures closing in on him. He was sure this was how he was going to die. "No," he told himself. He wasn't going to give into the Gamemakers ploy. His foot gripped the side of the Cornucopia and he used all of his strength to pull himself upwards. His upper body was over the edge and he could make out Katniss getting ready to fire a deadly arrow at Cato. He let out a guttural cry as one of the creatures reached him and pulled at his leg. He could feel its claws tugging at his boot.

"Climb, Peeta!" Katniss turned and ran to him. "Climb!" Her hands reached out to his, but they couldn't get a hold of him. If Peeta let go and took her hands he could fall into the den of wild animals, they could both fall. She gripped his hand in one of hers and grabbed the back of his jacket with the other. Adrenaline shot through her as she hauled him to safety. She kept pulling him away from the edge, higher up the horn of the Cornucopia. "Come on, Peeta!"

He stumbled to his feet and they ran upwards. Cato was doubled over, trying to catch his breath, but he wasn't what either one of them feared in that moment. It was the beasts the Gamemakers sent in that were the immediate threat.

She heard Cato call something out to them, but she couldn't understand him. "What?"

"He said, 'Can they climb it'?"

Her eyes flew to the rim of the Cornucopia. The animals were trying to figure out a way to get to the top. There was something about them, Katniss realized. These weren't normal animals. They were familiar. She heard them letting out a high pitched squeal and saw them forming at the base of the metal structure. "What are they doing?" Katniss could feel her heart palpitating as she saw two of the beasts

clasp their paws together and a third one running for them. The pair of creatures boosted the running one in an upward motion towards their location. What kind of animal can do this, she thought? "Mutts!" She called to Peeta as she took aim on the one that was making its way over the edge of the Cornucopia. But these weren't normal mutts and Katniss knew it. She saw the face of the beast as she took aim and noticed the unnatural color of its fur. Not quite white, it had a pink tinge to it. Its collar was made intricately woven lace and its eyelashes were long and pink. Pink! "Effie." Had the Capitol taken out their revenge on those that had helped Katniss and Peeta in the Games? Would they actually hurt one of their own?

"Shoot it, Katniss!"

The sound of Peeta's scream shook her to her senses and she let the arrow fly right through the mutt's lace collar. She saw the blood spattering from its wound and heard it whining like an injured animal. Katniss stood still. She surveyed the other mutts that were surrounding them.

"Katniss?" Peeta was grabbing her by the arm. Dragging her further up the Cornucopia.

"It's them," she said to Peeta. Her eyes were large with fear.

"Who?" Peeta turned to look at the mutations.

"Effie...Haymitch...Cinna..." Katniss saw the features of the mutations. Their coloring, each of them had different colored fur. Three of them were sandy blond, like Peeta. She could make out the blue of their eyes. One of them had a chocolate colored coat with gold surrounding its eyes. Three of them were light blond, one had longer fur than the rest and... Katniss choked on her breath. "PRIM!" She could never resist those overly large eyes. Fear that the Capitol had

taken their friends and family into custody and implanted their eyes into the mutations sent a bolt of sheer horror through her. Peeta reached out and grabbed her before she could run to the mutt that looked like Prim.

Peeta took in what she was saying and stared at the Capitol's creations. He saw two stocky beasts and knew they were meant for him. They were his brothers. Another beast had been taller than the other two, but still had similar features, it was his father. He wanted to run to them. To save them from the Capitol, but he couldn't. This was the Gamemakers plan and he knew it. "No, Katniss. No." He gripped her by the arms and shook her. "It isn't them." He looked around and tried to believe what he was saying, "It can't be."

"Gale!" Katniss saw the tall mutt making his way over the rim of the Cornucopia. It was Gale. She held up her arrow, but couldn't pull on the bow. She couldn't kill Gale. Even taking out the mutt formation of him repulsed her. Its coat was black, straight and shiny. Its eyes were Seam grey. The same ones that looked at her in the woods...that watched her back and kept her secrets. The mutation was taller than the rest of the pack. Its shoulders wider and its reach longer. In one swift move it reached out and slashed at Peeta's leg causing a long cut down the length of his calf. Katniss lifted her bow and shot her arrow, without hesitation, killing the Capitol's version of her lifelong friend.

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"What are those things?" Posy ran to Gale and he took her into his lap.

"Mutts," Gale said with disdain. He watched as Katniss shot at the one she called Effie and wondered why the Capitol would create a mutation out of the woman. She was one of their own and Katniss hated everyone from the Capitol. She'd probably enjoy killing off a mutt that symbolized Effie Trinket.

"It's them," Katniss' head was flying back and forth taking in the different beasts that surrounded them.

"Who?" Peeta called to her.

"Effie...Haymitch... Cinna...PRIM!"

"NO!" Gale screamed out at the television as Katniss began heading for the blond covered creature with overly large eyes.

"No, Katniss. No." Peeta held onto her and shook her as he said, "It isn't them. It can't be."

Gale's entire family was staring slack jawed at the television set. Gale lifted his sister off of his lap and sat her down between himself and his mother. "How is she supposed to kill something that looks like Prim?" He asked Hazelle.

His mother's face was full of terror as she saw the Capitol's version of her own son reaching out to kill Peeta.

"Gale," Katniss' eyes were wide with horror as she looked at the mutation.

Gale was repulsed by the scene. He was turned into a monster at the hands of the Gamemakers. A killing machine for the viewing audience. No one would really know who he was in other districts, but Katniss

and Peeta would know and that's what the Gamemakers were counting on.

"No," Posy cried. "Not Peeta."

They could hear Peeta's scream as the animal's claw entered his flesh and tore it open. Blood shot out of the slices the mutt made in Peeta's leg and sprayed across the base of the Cornucopia just as Katniss' arrow plunged into the eye of the Gale mutation, killing it instantly.

"Peeta!" Katniss called out and pulled him to her. She dragged him to the center of the Cornucopia, but Cato was already on his way to her. He grabbed her around her neck and forced her to the edge of the horn. She was flat on her back and he was pushing her head over the side. Holding it down for the mutts to reach.

Gale was shaking as he watched the mutts step back and make way for the one that had been made in Prim's image. It ran with its claws and teeth bared, straight for Katniss' head.

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Katniss couldn't breathe. She knew if the mutts didn't kill her, the pressure of Cato's hand on her throat would. His eyes were crazed. There was no reason for Cato not to snap her neck, except to provide the audience with a good show. She could hear the high pitched sounds coming from the mutts. She gasped for air. She was choking. Dying.

The Prim mutation was headed straight for Katniss. "NOOOO!" Peeta cried out as he felt adrenaline coursing through his veins. He ran at Cato and rammed him in the stomach with his shoulder. In one swift

move he lifted the Career off of Katniss and threw him across the Cornucopia like a sack of flour. The mutt missed its chance at beheading Katniss and slammed into the side of the Cornucopia.

Katniss scrambled for her bow. Her feet were sliding across the top of the golden horn. Her palms gripping at its surface. She needed to kill Cato. If she killed him then they'd win and the Games would be over.

Peeta turned to Katniss to pull her up, but she was already making her way to the bow. Peeta took a step in her direction and felt the arm around his neck cutting off his air supply. Cato had him in a death grip. He could hear the sound of Cato's ragged breathing pulsing in his ear. He tried to step out of Cato's grip, but his tattered leg was useless. He felt himself being dragged to the edge of the Cornucopia, his feet slipping on the blood that was flowing freely from his calf. He reached down in an absent manner to try and staunch the flow of it, but it caused Cato's grip to tighten.

Katniss whipped herself around to take aim at Cato and stopped before releasing the arrow.

Cato's maniacal laugh caused the hairs on the back of her neck to stand on end. "Go on. Shoot." He taunted her. "Then we both go down and you win." Peeta was struggling to keep his footing as Cato tightened his deadly hold. "Go on. I'm dead anyway..." The Career, who had been full of himself throughout the entire competition, was now coming to terms with his own death. "...I always was, right? I...I didn't know that till now." Cato looked to the dark sky and said, "How's that?"

What was he doing? Katniss couldn't believe what she was seeing. Cato was challenging the Capitol.

"Is that what you wanted?" Cato screamed out to the invisible Gamemakers.

Katniss saw his movements as a chance to free Peeta from his grip. She lifted her arrow, but Cato glared at her and smiled.

"No...Nuh uh!" He was moving Peeta back and forth as if trying to dare Katniss to take aim. "I can still do this. One more kill. It's the only thing I know how to do. Bring pride to my district..." Cato began laughing like a mad man. "I can still do this!"

Peeta's eyes met Katniss' as Cato rambled on. He could almost hear her mind formulating a plan, but Peeta knew he'd be dead by the time she figured out what to do. Peeta's hands stopped clawing at the arm Cato had around his neck. He felt his way across the Career's forearm until he reached the back of Cato's hand. He held onto Katniss' piercing stare and slowly drew an X on the hand that was choking him.

Katniss' eyes flashed to the spot Peeta marked and took aim. Cato's laugh turned into a scream as Katniss' arrow pierced his flesh. Peeta threw his shoulder back against Cato and the Career lost his footing; plunging to the ground. The sound of Cato being brutally attacked was instantaneous. The mutts converged on him and began ripping at his flesh.

Peeta collapsed to his knees and Katniss caught him before he fell face first onto the bloody metal surface. She expected the cannon to sound, but it didn't. She could hear Cato's screams and the sound of metal scraping metal, that's when she remembered his body armor.

"Peeta," she was trembling. The air in the arena was frigid and the Cornucopia was in the center of an open field. There were no trees...no bushes to prevent the icy air from blowing right through them. "Move your hands." Peeta's fingers were covering the cut in his

leg. Katniss tried to assess it with her eyes, but she couldn't see through the blood. She let her fingers trail down along his calf and felt the gravity of his wound. There wasn't one cut, but three of them. The back of his leg was practically shredded.

"Katniss," Peeta's breathing was heavy and he could feel the life draining out of him. "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," her voice was shaking. Peeta was going to die if she didn't stop the bleeding, but how.

"I never wanted to leave you."

"Then don't!" She looked around for their backpack, but it had been left by the lake when they escaped from the mutts. She did the only thing she could think of. "Peeta, I have to stop the bleeding or you'll die and you can't die. You promised me you wouldn't." She took off her jacket and ripped off her shirt. "I'm going to put a tourniquet on your leg." She pulled her jacket back on and zipped it up. She ripped off a strip from her shirt and tied it above the bleeding. She grabbed her last arrow and forced it through the knot she had made. "You might lose your leg, Peeta."

"Better than the alternative, right?" Peeta felt the first twist of the tourniquet and clenched his teeth.

"That's right." Katniss kept turning the tourniquet until the blood stopped flowing freely out of Peeta's leg then used the remaining portion of her shirt to bandage Peeta's calf.

"I'm tired," his voice was weak.

"Don't go to sleep." Katniss ordered him. "You have to stay awake."

Peeta nodded his head and noticed Katniss shivering. "Come here." He unzipped his jacket and pulled her into it. "You're cold."

They sat huddled together, trying to stay warm. Katniss forcing Peeta to stay awake. The sounds of Cato screaming...crying out in pain, surrounded them.

"Why don't they just kill him?" Katniss spoke into Peeta's neck.

"You said it yourself...it's the finale." Peeta held her head against him. "Why does he keep fighting them?" Neither one of them needed to voice the answer. Cato was a Career. He was raised to fight until his dying breath.

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He couldn't sit still. It had been hours since Cato had fallen from the Cornucopia and the Gamemakers wanted to make an example out of him, so the mutts took their time. They slashed at the body armor, which held up, leaving his head free from injuries. They tore at Cato's feet leaving them in bloody stumps. His hands, shredding his fingers down to the bones. One of the mutts stood atop Cato and sliced him across the throat, but not deep enough to cause death. Then it licked the wound and let the blood from his injury drip from its mouth onto Cato's cheek.

Cato had tears streaming down his face as he realized who the Capitol's mutation was designed for. "Mom?" Cato stared into the mutts eyes. The creature sneered and licked his wound again then jumped off of him.

Gale stood up and ran out of his house. He could no longer watch what had been one of the worst stunts the Capitol ever pulled during the Games. He ran to the woods, but the fence was on. He was desperate to hide. The thought of Katniss being tortured to death by the mutts was first and foremost in his mind. He turned and ran as far as his feet could take him and collapsed to the ground. The sun was almost up. How long had it been since the final battle began? How long had Peeta been lying in a pool of his own blood atop the Cornucopia? And was Catnip still alive? His questions had him up and headed for the town's square. He entered it just as the sun came over the horizon.

"I think he's closer now, Katniss. Can you shoot him?" Peeta's voice was weak, but he was alive. They both were.

"My last arrow's in your tourniquet." Peeta gripped the arrow in an attempt to remove it. "No!" Katniss stopped him. "You'll bleed to death."

"I'm already bleeding to death," Peeta whispered. Gale could see the turmoil in Katniss' expression. Peeta pulled Katniss' hand off of the arrow and removed it from his bandaged leg. He handed it to Katniss and said, "Shoot straight, Katniss."

Katniss took the arrow out of Peeta's hand and grit her teeth. She stood at the edge of the Cornucopia and looked down at Cato. Gale wanted to puke from the sight of him. The mutts had gotten through the armor in certain spots and he could make out chunks of the Career's flesh squeezing through the seams. His head was now a tangled mess. His cheeks had bloody slices, part of his lip was gone, but his eyes were still alert. Katniss pulled back on the string of her bow and let the arrow fly into Cato's skull.

"Did you get him?" Peeta called out. The sound of the cannon's blast answered his question.

Hoots and hollers erupted through the crowd in the square. Gale stood unblinking. "They won," he breathed out.

Katniss raced to Peeta's side. "It's over."

Peeta's head fell back as he choked out, "We won."

"Hooray for us," Katniss buried her head against Peeta's chest.

Gale watched as a hole opened in the woods and the mutts disappeared into it. He was expecting the sound of Claudius Templesmith's voice to announce the Victors from District 12, but nothing happened.

"What the hell?" Gale heard someone next to him call out. "Announce the winners already!"

The crowd was getting restless as was Gale. They all watched as Katniss and Peeta determined that they needed to move away from Cato so the hovercraft could remove his remains, and made their way to the lake. At the first sign of the Capitol's craft, the entire square cheered. They watched as Cato was lifted from the ground and celebrated when they heard the familiar voice of the Games speak.

"Attention Tributes! Attention! There has been a slight rule change. The previous revision allowing for two Victors has been revoked. Only one Victor may be crowned. Good luck and may the odds be ever in your favor."

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The night was never ending. Haymitch wanted to drink. He wanted to close himself up in a room and drink until he passed out, but when he stood up he felt Effie's damning stare and sat back down. Effie, he thought to himself, I never meant to get you so deep into this. The moment Haymitch had seen that the Capitol turned the escort into a mutation, he knew it wasn't meant for Katniss and Peeta, but as a warning to the woman who had let her patriotism falter. Effie had no clue what she signed up for when she chose to help him, Cinna and Portia. Haymitch had never intended on telling her that her overzealous actions could be a danger to her. She was from the Capitol and couldn't be trusted. But she had put her trust in him and Haymitch felt as though he had let the woman down. He could only hope that she would go back to her Capitol ways once they left and keep her head down. Then he overheard her comment to Portia and knew that Effie Trinket could never go back to the way she was before. Yes, it was the longest night of his life.

In all the years Effie had been a part of the Hunger Games, this had been the most brutal display she'd ever seen. She could barely stomach what was being played out on the screen and though she wanted to leave, she would not give the Gamemakers the pleasure of seeing her faith in Katniss and Peeta waiver.

She and Portia had gripped hands more often than not during the night and when Effie heard the catch in Portia's throat, she turned to the stylist and whispered harshly, "Don't cry. Don't give them the satisfaction." Portia nodded at Effie and held her tears at bay for the remainder of the night.

Cinna tried to stay strong. He allowed himself a few seconds in which he'd close his eyes and take a few deep breaths then he'd keep focused on the television screen. They all needed to stay strong for Katniss and Peeta's sake.

The silent support from the Capitol was all the team from District 12 could offer Peeta and Katniss and they were all determined to provide it until the end of the Games. They sat with their shoulders straight, heads high and confident. Nothing would break this team.

The sound of the cannon announcing Cato's death caused an eruption in the Capitol. The team from District 12 all clasped hands and smiled at one another.

"They did it," Cinna said quietly.

"Did you ever doubt them?" Effie asked.

They sat at the edge of their seats in wait. Seconds ticked by and their smiles slowly faded.

"Something's wrong," Haymitch said under his breath. "They should've announced them as the winners by now."

"Perhaps Katniss is right? Maybe they have to move away from Cato and let the hovercraft come for him?" But Effie knew even as she asked the questions, the Gamemakers had one final twist left in the Games.

"There it is," Portia said as the image of the hovercraft appeared and lifted Cato's body up.

"Attention Tributes! Attention! There has been a slight rule change. The previous revision allowing for two Victors has been revoked. Only one Victor may be crowned. Good luck and may the odds be ever in your favor," Claudius Templesmith announced.

Haymitch remembered Effie's comment about the Gamemakers always being a few moves ahead in the Games. Just like chess, he thought. Haymitch turned to Effie and said, "Checkmate."

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"Wake up, Peeta! Wake up!" Katniss shook his shoulders and screamed at him until his eyes fluttered open. "Do not fall asleep! You have to fight it, Peeta." Her arms wrapped around him inside of his jacket. "Don't leave me here," she was petrified that Peeta would die before Cato.

"I won't," he whispered and kissed her hooded head. "I won't leave you."

"You can't, Peeta." Katniss was on the verge of crying, but fought the tears. "I'll never forgive you if you do," she tried to smile, but it was useless.

"Look at the moon, Katniss." She didn't move. "Look at it." He felt her head tipping upwards. "Can you tell how much time until morning?"

Katniss looked up at the heavens and saw the moon's progress. "We have awhile yet." She sat quietly. "Do you think he'll be dead by morning?"

"Let's hope so. If not, then you'll be able to see him and you can shoot him." He felt Katniss nod against his chest. "Talk to me, Katniss." Peeta could feel himself falling asleep.

"I...I can't."

"You can." Peeta squeezed her torso. "Talk to me."

"About what?" Katniss couldn't think of anything but the sounds Cato was making from the ground below them.

"Anything...your dad. Tell me about your father."

Katniss lifted her face to his and said, "What do you want to know?"

"Tell me the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of him."

"He made me happy." Katniss swallowed hard. "I miss him so much."

"I know you do, but you're surviving without him. You're taking care of your family and living your life, even though he's gone." Peeta didn't know if he was going to die or not, but if he did, he wanted Katniss to know she could go on without him.

"I guess."

"My mother was right when she said you were a survivor. You are." Peeta felt his eyelids drooping and fought to keep them open. "I think you can endure anything."

Katniss looked at him and said, "Why are you saying this, Peeta?"

He lifted his eyebrows as if saying, I might die. "You'll be all right no matter what, Katniss."

"I'll be all right when we win and we go back to District 12." She pulled him closer to her. "And we are going back...together."

"Okay, Katniss." Peeta wasn't sure if he'd be going back lying in a pine box or sitting on a train, but he knew he'd be sent back to District 12 eventually.

"I've decided to forgive you, Peeta." Katniss told him.

"Forgive me?"

"For Buttercup." Katniss kissed his cheek. "Prim loves that cat."

"She's a great girl." Peeta told her. "She taught me the difference between a mint leaf and basil."

"She did?" Katniss had no clue that Prim had ever discussed herbs with Peeta. Maybe when she was taking care of Buttercup, she thought.

"Prim taught me about a lot of stuff in the meadow." Peeta wanted Katniss to know how exceptional Prim was to him too.

"Peeta? When did Prim go to the meadow with you? She never mentioned that she saw you there."

"She wouldn't have. I asked her not to." Peeta shivered as a rush of cold air blew across them. "But I used to see her there and she'd point out the different herbs...flowers...she taught me a lot." Peeta couldn't say that Prim picked them, because that would be considered stealing from the Capitol. "I told my parents I had to tutor her after school and each day I'd meet her there."

Why didn't you meet me there? Katniss wanted to ask him, but she knew the answer. Because she was in the woods with Gale...hunting. "You were her friend?"

"She was mine," Peeta said softly. "She used to tell me all about you." Peeta looked down at Katniss and said, "She worries about you...about you and your mother."

"She probably worried about you too. Prim's that way."

"That's not what I mean, Katniss."

"I know." Katniss understood what Peeta was saying. It was time to try and forgive her mother for checking out after her father died. Katniss wondered if Peeta died, if she'd react the same way her mother did. Something inside of her said it would be worse. That she'd never recover if Peeta died. She began rubbing her hands up and down his sides inside of his jacket.

"If boys could volunteer for girls during the reaping, I would've volunteered for Prim." Peeta looked down into Katniss' eyes. "You Everdeen women are something special. Prim...she's special, Katniss. She helped take my mind off of all the bad stuff that was happening to me just by talking to me...about you." He smiled. "I think she knew I loved you before you did. She's all that's good and decent in this world. I would've volunteered for her without a doubt. This world would be a much better place if we had a few more people like Prim in it."

Oh, Prim. Katniss wished she could hug her sister and tell her thank you. Thank you for providing Peeta with a true friend when he needed it most. "Like you and Prim." Katniss gazed into his eyes. "Peeta...one day you're going to have to tell me everything you've done behind my back."

Peeta let out a little laugh and said, "Where's the fun in that?"

They sat holding each other for hours. When Peeta felt sleepy he'd start talking to Katniss about anything and everything. He asked her to point out the progress of the moon in the sky and they tried to figure out how long it had been since they left their cave.

"Katniss," Peeta whispered. "The sun is rising."

She could make out Peeta's features now. His face was pale and sallow. His eyes sunken in. "We have to get you back to the Capitol."

"I think he's closer now, Katniss. Can you shoot him?" Peeta barely had any energy.

"My last arrow's in your tourniquet." Peeta automatically reached down to pull it out of the tourniquet. "No! You'll bleed to death."

"I'm already bleeding to death," Peeta whispered to her. He could see it in her eyes. She couldn't bring herself to remove the arrow, but she needed to if they had any chance of surviving. He placed his hand over hers and took it off of the arrow then pulled it out. "Shoot straight, Katniss."

Katniss had no idea how she could keep herself steady. She was frozen solid and petrified that Peeta would bleed to death the second the tourniquet was released. Then she heard him say, "Shoot straight, Katniss." It was the same advice he had given her before she went into her private session with the Gamemakers. She took the arrow out of Peeta's hand and walked to the edge of the Cornucopia, blocking out the sounds Cato was making, knowing that she couldn't let anything distract her from her target or Peeta would die. Just like the apple, Katniss, she thought to herself as she pulled back on the bow's string. She saw Cato's pleading eyes and knew it was time to put an end to his suffering. To all of their suffering. When she released the arrow it wasn't Cato she was shooting, but President Snow himself. He was the reason they were in the arena. He was the reason all of the tributes had died. The arrow entered Cato's skull with such force, it killed him instantly.

"Did you get him?" Katniss turned to Peeta as the final cannon of the Games shot out.

"It's over." She ran to Peeta.

"We won," Peeta wanted to cry as he hung his head back. He wanted to scream. To yell. Why? Why did this have to happen? Why did all of these kids have to die? Just so you could have your Games?

"Hooray for us," Katniss buried her head against Peeta's chest and tried to hide her sorrow.

"They're leaving," Peeta noticed the sound of the mutts getting quieter.

Katniss looked out and saw an opening in the forest that they vanished into. She reached out and clasped Peeta's hands in hers. Both of them had his dried blood covering them. Okay...now, Katniss thought. They need to come now, but nothing was happening. If they waited much longer, Peeta would be dead. "Hey!" Katniss called out. "What's going on? Why aren't they doing anything?"

"Maybe we have to move away from his body?" Peeta questioned.

"Do you think you can make it to the lake?" Katniss didn't think he could. She could barely stand, so how Peeta got up and walked was beyond her belief.

"I think I better try."

They made their way back to the lake and Katniss bent down to wash his blood off of her hands. "Put your hands out." She bent down and scooped water up and rinsed his until almost all of the blood was gone, then held some up to his lips for him to drink.

They both lifted their eyes up when the hovercraft appeared out of thin air and lifted Cato's corpse into it. They waited for the announcement proclaiming them as the Victors, but none came and the hovercraft disappeared.

"What are they waiting for?" Peeta looked to Katniss.

"I don't know." Katniss saw the blood dripping from Peeta's leg and walked into the distance for a stick to tie his up his tourniquet, but found the arrow that had bounced off of Cato's body armor just a few feet away. She headed back to Peeta but before she reached him she heard static. At the sound of Claudius Templesmith's voice Katniss instinctively raised her bow and last arrow.

"Attention Tributes! Attention! There has been a slight rule change. The previous revision allowing for two Victors has been revoked. Only one Victor may be crowned. Good luck and may the odds be ever in your favor."

Katniss' heart sank. They had been played. The Gamemakers wanted to guarantee the best battle for the end. The mutts weren't the finale. She and Peeta were. From the moment they announced two winners the Gamemakers had been planning on this and Katniss knew it. She cursed herself for walking straight into their trap.

"If you think about it, it's not that surprising." Peeta gave Katniss a disheartening look. Had he really expected them both to walk out of the Games as victors, he asked himself. Peeta had entered the Games intending on sacrificing his life for Katniss, so this newest deception didn't seem to shock him. The Gamemakers wanted to make sure he had something to live for while he was in the arena and making them believe that both he and Katniss could win, gave them both enough drive to reach the final battle. He took the knife out of his belt and threw it into the lake. It was time to give the viewing audience...the Capitol what they wanted. "Go on. Do it," Peeta encouraged Katniss to use the last arrow on him.

"I can't," Katniss looked at him as though he were insane. "I won't." She dropped to her knees in front of him and began putting his leg

back into the tourniquet, but he pulled it away from her and ripped off the remainder of the bandage.

"Fine. I'll go first anyway."

She was furious. Not with Peeta but with the Capitol. She shoved the bow and arrow into Peeta's hand and screamed, "Then you do it! You shoot me and go home and live with it!"

"You know I can't do that," there was pain crying out in Peeta's voice. "Please, Katniss?" He tried to force the weapon back into her hands. "It's what I want."

"You said you wouldn't leave me," she was shaking.

"Do you think I want to leave you here? That's the last thing I want." He reached his hand out and lifted her chin so she could face him. "We both know they have to have their victor."

Katniss couldn't move. She couldn't breathe. If Peeta died she'd want to die too. She was tempted to take the arrow and stab it through her heart, but she couldn't leave Peeta with that kind of guilt so she followed Peeta's lead and threw the weapon in the lake.

"No, Katniss." Peeta said to her. He hung his head down and lifted his eyes to hers. "I'll bleed to death anyway. They have to have their victor, Katniss."

She lifted herself and stood in front of him. "No. They don't." she refused to leave the arena without Peeta. The Capitol wanted to play games...fine, she thought. Let them play mine and Peeta's Game now. She put her hand in her pocket and pulled out the deadly berries. "Why should they?"

Peeta gripped her wrist, "No. I won't let you."

Katniss leaned into him, her free hand stroked the back of his head as she whispered into his ear, "We're more than a piece in their Games. I would rather die than live without you." She turned his palm upright and poured half of the berries into it.

Peeta looked down at his hand and stared at the berries. She was asking him to die...to let her die. To show up the Capitol? Because she couldn't live without him? He didn't know. He searched her eyes for the answer and found it. Living as residents of the Seam, Town or as Victors didn't matter unless they could live their lives together. He nodded once then said, "Together?"

"Together," her voice was soft and tender.

"Hold them up. I want everyone to see," Peeta told her. The Capitol wouldn't get their victor after all. It was either both of them or neither one of them. Either way, Katniss and Peeta were both secure in their decision.

Katniss held the berries high into the sky so the cameras could focus on them. She was leaving the arena with Peeta by her side. Dead or alive, they'd end the Games as they started them...as a team...as one.

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The dark berries glistened in the palm of Katniss' hand and across the nation no one spoke a word. Strangers, friends...family, all of them held their breath as Katniss and Peeta stood staring at one another. Preparing to eat the deadly fruit.

Gale stared up at the large screen in District 12. Every muscle in his body was frozen in place as the combination of pain, fury and love rushed through him. Don't, Catnip, he thought. Please don't. You can still win this. Let Peeta die. Come home to me. I love you, but Gale knew she'd never be able to allow the baker's son to sacrifice himself for her.

Cinna raised his chin with pride as a tear rolled down his face. It has been my honor knowing you both, he thought. You have moved a nation and showed us all that each of us can make a difference if we believe in what we're fighting for.

Portia licked her dry lips and wished Katniss and Peeta an eternity of love and happiness. You two deserve a world in which you can live, laugh and love. You deserve better than this country could ever provide.

Effie felt shame coursing through her. I'm sorry, she thought. So sorry I ever called your name...your sister's name. Sorry for being a part of these Games for so long and not realizing the consequences they had on people. Effie was sorry that geography dictated the course of all of their lives. She remembered what Peeta and Katniss had done after eating their picnic. She could see Peeta lifting up the plate and licking it, saying that they missed her. I miss you too, Effie thought. I'll miss you both more than you'll ever know. Thank you for showing me all that I had been missing in my life.

This was why, Haymitch thought to himself. This was why Katniss and Peeta entered his world. They had the power to change a nation...to change him. Somehow you two wormed your way into my heart, he thought. You're more than just a couple of kids from District 12. More than tributes. More than victors and I'll always be honored to have been considered your mentor.

Peeta and Katniss stood toe to toe.

"On three," Peeta said quietly. His voice rang through a stunned nation.

Katniss lips were trembling as she pressed them against Peeta's. "I love you," her lips moved, but no sound came out.

"I love you," Peeta words were silent, but spoke volumes.

"One," Katniss placed her hand over Peeta's beating heart.

"Two," Peeta's fingers trailed down her silky braid.

"Three," their hands lifted the berries to their lips.

"Stop! Stop!" Katniss and Peeta froze as a frantic Claudius Templesmith spoke. "Ladies and Gentlemen, may I present to you the winners of the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games. Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark! The tributes of District 12."

74th Hunger Games

Challenge: We

Always Were Chapter

26: The Cost of

Victory, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Twenty-six: The Cost of Victory

Yes! I have decided to take on Catching Fire and Mockingjay. I'm sure I'm insane for doing this, but how do I stop at the end of this story? HUGE MONSTER thanks to my betas! All hail S and A! For reading and rereading and reading again. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. To those of you that read and review I give to you my eternal gratitude. And now...

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

The dark berries slipped through their fingers before reaching their lips. They had won the Games.

The roar of the Capitol audience filled the arena. The Gamemakers were playing the live coverage of the Capitol's reaction over the loudspeakers. Katniss could hear their hoots and hollers as Peeta's legs gave out under him. She held onto him...tried to hold him up as the hovercraft appeared overhead. Two ladders dropped down in front

of her, but Katniss refused to let go of Peeta's failing form. She half helped, half dragged him onto the first rung of the ladder and protected him with her body. They were instantly frozen in place and lifted onto the ship. The instant the electric current, holding them in place stopped, Peeta crumbled to the ground. His eyes rolled to the back of his head and he lost consciousness.

"Peeta!" Katniss fell to the ground with him. She took hold of his jacket and began shaking him; his head was flopping back and forth as she tried to rouse him. "Don't leave me," she cried out. "Don't leave me, Peeta." A swarm of people dressed in white converged on them and lifted Peeta to a silver table. Katniss tried to hold onto him for fear that they were sent in to kill him, but her weakened body was no match for them. "Where are you taking him?!" She screamed at them, only to be ignored. "Peeta!" She tried to run after him, but a glass door shut between them, blocking her entry. She saw the medical personnel hooking him up to machines; saw them working frantically to stop Peeta's bleeding. Hands gripped her shoulders and pulled her backwards to an adjoining room. "Get off of me!" Katniss felt their hands slip off of her. "Peeta!" She flung herself against the door and saw them moving him into another area. Her eyes followed their every move. Someone placed a glass of orange juice in her hand, but she paid it no mind. All she cared about was the boy lying on the silver table, bleeding to death. Her body couldn't take anymore. She slumped to the floor and watched as another doctor entered the room and began working on Peeta. Machines...lights...tubes...fluids...she had no idea what was happening. It was all so strange and then she saw the doctors rushing around him. It was apparent by the looks on their faces that they were yelling back and forth to one another. They kept looking at one of the machines Peeta was hooked up to. All of the lines on it were flat. Peeta was dead. Katniss stood up and threw herself against the glass that separated them and began pounding on it with her fists. "No," she cried out. "Peeta!" The doctors stood back

and Katniss saw Peeta's upper body lift off of the table then drop back down. The lines on the machine showed peaks and valleys and the doctors went back to work on Peeta's leg.

Within minutes they were on the roof of the Training Center and she watched as Peeta was rolled away. She wanted to go with him. She needed to, but she was trapped like a rat in a glass cage. "PEETA!" She flung herself against the clear wall towards him. Her fists were beating against the glass in a mad attempt to free herself from the Capitol's confines. Strong hands took hold of her upper arms, there was a pinch and then...darkness.

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The team from District 12 jumped from their seats and began hugging one another with the announcement of their victory. Effie felt herself being lifted into the air by Haymitch's arms and spun in a circle.

"We did it!" Haymitch called out. "They won!"

The second Effie's feet hit the floor she said, "We have to get to the medical center."

All of them agreed, but were accosted by multiple guests who were celebrating the victory of the Star Crossed Lovers.

"Go!" Cinna called out to them. "Portia and I will stay here and take care of this. Go!" He yelled to Effie and Haymitch, but it was useless. There were too many people converging on them.

Effie's mind began to race. They needed to get out of there. "Iola! Quillan!" The sponsors were heading straight towards them. If she

could direct people to the sponsors that made everything happen, they'd be able to escape.

"Effie! Congratulations!" Lola hugged her. "To think, if it hadn't been for us, they never would've won."

"True," She replied the way she knew she must. "Thank goodness for the generosity of District 12's sponsors like you," she said quite loudly. A new group of people were coming towards them and jumped on Effie's words.

"Were you two part of the picnic? We heard that was very exclusive! None of us could get in on it." Effie heard someone saying to the pair of sponsors as she took hold of Haymitch's arm and dragged him to the exit.

They reached the hall and for the first time in her life, Effie Trinket ran like a mad woman. "Come on, Haymitch!"

Haymitch laughed as he watched her racing for the elevator. She was wearing spiked shoes, a tight skirt, a fitted jacket and there was a tiny hat perched on top of her wig bouncing with each step she took. "I'm coming," he chuckled.

Portia and Cinna stayed at the party and slowly made their way to the exit, claiming they had to get to work on the costumes for Katniss and Peeta's crowning. Once they made it out, they too rushed to the medical bay.

They found Effie and Haymitch standing in a white room, with overly large chairs and a television screen filled with a scene from District 12. There was no sound coming from it, but it was obvious, from the faces that lit up the screen, the district was celebrating.

"Is he alive?" Effie asked a woman dressed in white.

"He is for now."

"What do you mean, for now?" Haymitch's voice was getting loud.

"We lost him a few times, but we were able to revive him. He's in surgery right now. They aren't sure if they can save his leg."

"Forget the damn leg! Save the kid!" Haymitch screamed.

"Should I inform the doctors that you're giving your consent to provide him with a prosthetic if needed?"

"They can do whatever the hell they have to. Just don't let that boy die." Haymitch ran his hand down his face as he watched the Capitol attendant leave the room.

"What's going on?" Cinna asked.

"Katniss is fine. They're operating on her ear right now. She's lost a lot of weight...she's a bit dehydrated, but she'll live." Haymitch answered.

"And Peeta?" Portia gripped Haymitch's arm. "What about him?"

Haymitch shook his head. "Don't know. He's lost a lot of blood. They're doing everything they can."

"Are they?" Cinna asked him quietly.

The thought had crossed Haymitch's mind that they'd let Peeta die, but allowing that to happen would be like the Capitol saying they weren't in control of the current situation. Not saving Peeta's life wasn't an option. "They announced two victors so they'll have two victors."

Haymitch stared at Cinna. "He'll probably lose his leg, but you can be damn sure they'll save his life."

Effie sat on the edge of a chair. "They have to."

"What do we do now?" Portia asked.

"How are their costumes coming along?" Haymitch wondered.

"We've got our teams working on them, but we're going off of their measurements prior to entering the arena. We'll have to take them in, I'm sure." Cinna answered. "Any chance of us seeing them when they're out of surgery?"

Haymitch nodded his head. "The moment they're out, I'll get you two in so you can do what you need to, but..."

"But what?" Effie asked.

"In years past, they've kept the mentors away from the victor...makes for a more dramatic reunion on television." Haymitch looked at Effie with worried eyes.

"Oh, they won't be keeping any of us away from either one of them. You can be sure of that!" Effie stood up and said, "How long do you think this will take?" Effie pointed to the door the attendant exited through.

"They'll keep them sedated for awhile...tomorrow. The next day maybe." Haymitch said.

"Then we've got work to do." Effie stood up and said, "Cinna, you and Portia get with your team and make sure their costumes are to your satisfaction. If you want a job done right, you have to do it yourself. Haymitch, we have sponsors and Gamemakers to thank on District

12's behalf. We need to show everyone the same confidence we've been showing them throughout the Games. We're all going to freshen up and look our best. We've got a show to put on." Effie raised her shoulders and said quietly to them. "I'll be sending in someone to help care for our pair. If either one of them as much as twitches in their sleep, we'll know about it. Now let's go."

"Who are you sending in there?" Haymitch asked Effie under his breath as they walked down the hall. She didn't answer. She pursed her lips and pressed the twelve button on the elevator. She walked into the penthouse of the Tribute Center, the place Katniss and Peeta had called home prior to entering the arena and saw who she was looking for.

"You there," Effie pointed to the redheaded Avox girl that was stationed against a wall by Katniss' former quarters. "They won't be back for some time. Your job is to care for our tributes. Go down to the medical center and be useful." The girl nodded and walked to the elevator. "Keep us informed of any news," Effie whispered to her, in a much kinder voice, as she was stepping into the elevator. The girl raised her eyes to Effie's and nodded. Effie gave her a little smile and dropped it. "Go on now," she made a shooing motion with her hands. "Katniss and Peeta can't care for themselves."

Haymitch turned his head and looked down at the escort. He had to admit, the woman had guts. "You think they'll just let her in?"

"They won't even notice her." Effie said quietly. "No one pays attention to an Avox." No one, but Katniss, she thought.

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"He's back."

Peeta's eyelids were heavy. He opened them a hair and took in as much as he could. He didn't try to move, he couldn't. He was surrounded by eyes. He couldn't make out anything else, but the eyes that were staring at him...at the things around him. The bodies that stood over him were shrouded in white and blended in with the walls. The light was so bright it hurt his eyes. He shut them and the whole world went dark.

"Don't leave me, Peeta!" He could hear Katniss' voice in his head. He could see her standing in front of him. She looked beautiful. Her hair was in its trademark braid, a bow and arrows strapped onto her shoulder. She was wearing fitted brown pants and a button up shirt with a vest over it and brown boots laced up just past her ankles. She was standing underneath their meeting spot and smiling at him. "You said you wouldn't leave me, Peeta." He wanted to talk to her. To tell her he was right there with her. He wasn't going anywhere, but there was something behind her...someone. She stood in the distance. A small girl dressed in white gossamer with tiny wings on her back. Peeta stared at the child and wondered what she was doing dressed that way in the middle of District 12. He walked closer to her and tried to make out who it was, but others joined her. A group of kids ranging in age. A boy with a crippled foot. A girl with red hair. And then he saw the eyes...the eyes that would haunt him for the rest of his life. The girl he killed from District 8 was standing behind the little girl wearing wings. "Peeta? Peeta?" He turned his head to look at Katniss who was still standing underneath their oak tree. "Don't leave me." He wanted to ask her why they were all there. Why were all the tributes there in District 12? He walked closer to the group of tributes so he could ask them, but Katniss' voice called to him again, "Don't leave me, Peeta." She sounded like she was in pain. Like she was hurting. He took one last look at the twenty-two dead tributes and turned to

Katniss. He walked to her and took her hands in his. He glanced over his shoulder, but the other tributes were gone. All he saw was a bright white light flashing in his eyes.

"Peeta? Peeta?" He blinked. Portia was standing over him with something in her hand. Behind her he saw nothing but white walls and the bright white light that had invaded his dream.

"Kat..." His throat was dry and sore.

"She's fine. She's just fine," Portia had tears falling down her cheeks. "Peeta, she's going to help you. I have to go, but I'll be back soon." She kissed his head.

Peeta tried to lift his hand to her, but he couldn't move. He looked up into the eyes of the redheaded Avox that had taken care of them when they were at the Tribute Center. The girl that had been punished for running away from the Capitol. She placed her hand underneath his head and lifted a straw to his lips. Peeta drank as much as he could and felt her lowering his head back down. He tried his voice again, "Th..." but speaking was too much of an effort. He stared into the girl's face and mouthed, "thank you." She nodded her head at him and walked away. Peeta tried to take in his surroundings, but he couldn't move his head on his own, so he closed his eyes and let sleep take him.

"There he is now," Peeta heard Haymitch's voice as he opened his eyes. "How ya feeling, boy?"

He lifted his hand to his head and rubbed his eyes. "Haymitch?" Peeta slowly sat upright. "What's..." He looked around the room and saw Effie sitting across from Haymitch. "Where's Katniss?" The sound of his voice seemed almost foreign to him.

"She's in recovery. They had to operate on her ear, but other than that and a few minor details...she's just fine," Effie grasped Peeta's hand in hers.

"One of you should be with her," Peeta didn't want Katniss to be alone now that they were back at the Capitol.

"Let's not worry about that right now..." Haymitch looked across him at Effie.

There was something wrong. Peeta could feel it inside. "What's going on? Is it Katniss?" He asked them, petrified that they were lying to him about Katniss. That she had eaten the berries after all and died to save him.

"No," Effie squeezed his hand. "We have some...something to tell you."

Peeta could see the panic in Effie's eyes. "What?"

"The doctors had to remove your leg." Haymitch blurted out. "But they gave you the best prosthetic around. You're not even going to notice it, boy. It's top of the line, right Effie?"

"Oh, yes." Effie joined in. "I'm amazed at what they can do with these things. It's surgically attached and works just like your own leg would." She tried to smile.

Peeta stared back and forth between them. His leg? He lost his leg? "That's it?" he asked. "I lost my leg?"

Effie lifted her eyebrows in surprise. "Yes."

Peeta let his head fall back and blew out a breath. "I thought you were going to tell me Katniss had died or something." The loss of Katniss outweighed the loss of any body part as far as he was concerned.

Haymitch smiled at him and said, "No, kid. She's doing fine. Just fine. We told you...she's in recovery."

"Can I see her?" Peeta asked.

"Not yet," Effie looked somewhat saddened when she answered. "They want to wait until your crowning to reunite you two."

"What for?" Peeta wanted to throw the sheet that had been covering him off and try his new leg out by running through the hospital, but the moment he moved, Haymitch pressed his hands against his shoulders to hold him down.

"They want it to be more dramatic...live television and all."

"I don't care about that," Peeta couldn't believe the Gamemakers were still controlling his and Katniss' lives. "We should be able to see each other. We shouldn't have to wait."

"Look, kid. The sooner you get better, the sooner you get to see her." Haymitch told him. "My suggestion is, let the doctors show you how to use that new leg of yours."

There was softness to Effie's voice when she said, "And try to eat as much as you can. You're too skinny."

Peeta grinned at her and said, "I'll try." He looked up and saw several people dressed in white walk into the room.

"They're going to take care of you, boy." Haymitch put his hand on Peeta's shoulder. "I'll see you before we go on air."

Peeta nodded at him. Effie leaned down and placed a kiss against his cheek. "Effie?" Peeta grabbed her hand. "Will you see Katniss?"

"No," she shook her head. "Not until right before the show. They only allowed us in so we could inform you about your leg." Effie looked at the group of medical staff waiting for her to leave. "I have to go, Peeta." She leaned down and placed another kiss against his cheek. She whispered in his ear, "She's asked about you. She's thinking about you too." Effie stood up and left.

Peeta looked at the glass door that closed behind them and took a moment to himself. He had to put things in order. He and Katniss had won the Games. The last thing he remembered was Katniss holding onto him on the ladder of the hovercraft. Then there were Portia and the Avox or was that a dream? Rue standing in the middle of District 12 wearing wings? The girl from District 8? Were they all a dream? They had to be, he thought to himself. They were dead. Someone handed him a tray of food and interrupted his thought process. The Avox girl was here, she wasn't a dream. Peeta noticed the doctors talking amongst themselves and whispered to the girl. "Have you seen Katniss?" She nodded, yes. "Will you be seeing her soon?" Again she nodded, yes. Peeta smiled and thought...if this girl could come here, then maybe Portia could come back too. "Can you send for my stylist?"

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He was wearing a shiny yellow suit and a wig to match. Anywhere other than the streets of the Capitol and he would've stuck out like a sore thumb. Haymitch walked into the tavern and sat at a corner table. It wasn't long before the woman with orange skin, attending the bar

came up to him and asked him what she could get him. "I'm looking for the restroom...and a book about wine."

The woman gave Haymitch a blank look and said, "Lucky for you we provide both in the back." She glanced over her shoulder and said, "Down the hall. To your right."

Haymitch walked to the end of the hall and stepped into the lavish washroom. He walked past the marble sinks that resembled miniature waterfalls and stepped into one of the three large stalls. A plush chair sat to the side, a table in the corner and a bookshelf lined with reading material sat to the right of that. He locked the door behind him and faced the books. He waited for over a minute until the lights flickered and the sound of a latch being released signaled he was safe to enter. He pushed and pulled a small series of books, ending with the History of Wine and watched as the wall disappeared. In its place was a long and dark hallway. He found the candle sitting in its usual place and lit it. The wall reappeared, closing him off from the tavern and leaving him in a desolate, cold walkway. There was no electricity and there never would be. Too many questions would arise if a power source was found behind the businesses that provided the rebels sanctuary. Haymitch made his way to his destination. The doorknob creaked when he turned it and caused a reverberating noise throughout the gloomy corridor.

"Haymitch," Plutarch greeted him as he entered the room. There was no time for pleasantries so he got down to business. "We have a problem."

"Figured we would," Haymitch said. "Question is...how big of a problem is it?"

A door from another part of the room opened up and Haymitch jumped when he heard the familiar voice behind him. "That depends on how you look at it."

The moment Haymitch saw the man he wanted to strangle him. "What the hell are *you* doing here?"

"Calm down, Haymitch." Plutarch stood in front of their ally for fear of Haymitch's reaction to the man.

The first time Plutarch mentioned bringing in a young Gamemaker to the rebellion, no one knew his identity. Four years ago, things were different. The rebels were trying to figure out a way to get the districts to come together. The living victors were trying to make contacts in their own districts, people they could turn into confidants. Some of the rebels had been young, some old, but all of them knew what had to be done. As far as everyone in the rebellion was concerned, the more alliances they could get in the Capitol the better. Plutarch brought up a young man that was making a name for himself. A man that would surely be of help to their cause, but Haymitch didn't believe that an up and coming Gamemaker would be willing to risk such a promising career over a bunch of lowly districts. It took some convincing and a lot of internal information passed onto the rebellion, but they all agreed to bring in Plutarch's ally. One of the main reasons was the new head Gamemaker, Seneca Crane. Many of the rebels had been worried. The new head Gamemaker had been appointed by President Snow himself. In the past, it was a position the a group of Capitol officials decided upon. This could only mean one thing as far as they were concerned, Seneca Crane had to share Snow's taste for power. He had only been a Gamemaker for a year before his promotion. The first year the new head Gamemaker ran the Games, all of them understood why he had received the position. His ingenious twists and turns in the Games had the Capitol going wild. Haymitch hated

Seneca Crane immediately, but respected the victor of that year's event: Johanna Mason.

After Katniss and Peeta's actions in the arena, Plutarch felt it was time to set up a meeting with the rebels in order to introduce their "silent" rebel in the Capitol. "It was imperative that we kept his identity a secret. Not only for himself, but for the rebellion." Plutarch stood up for the man standing behind him, Seneca Crane, informing Haymitch had it not been for Seneca, they wouldn't be nearly as informed of Snow's actions. "Seneca played his part of head Gamemaker very well. Showing no emotional turmoil when it came to the tributes, not playing favorites with any of them, unless otherwise directed by President Snow and always keeping his head in the Games. He's been a vital part of the rebellion." Plutarch slowly stepped away from him and asked, "Seneca. What's the news?"

"The berries are causing quite a ruckus amongst the officials here at the Capitol," Seneca answered.

"They're causing talk all over the nation," Finnick Odair stepped away from the spot he had been keeping against a stone wall eyeing up the head Gamemaker and not trusting him for a second.

"Right now, the Capitol is the laughing stock of Panem." Plutarch added. "Those two kids..." he shook his head.

"What they did..." Seneca continued for Plutarch. "They defied the Capitol publicly by that stunt with the berries."

Haymitch directed his anger towards the head Gamemaker. "What were they supposed to do?" Haymitch still couldn't believe Seneca was on their side. That he had been the one helping them to devise a way to tap into the Capitol's broadcast system and providing the

rebellion with intelligence regarding President Snow. "You made them believe they could both win. You made us *all* believe..."

"I had a job to do, Haymitch." Seneca held his head up. "I'm not proud of it, but I had to think of the greater good here."

"What did you think they'd do? Kill each other in the arena?" Haymitch felt the frustration coursing through him. "They didn't bring this on themselves, you know?" He flashed Seneca an accusing glare.

"I'm aware of that, but we never thought they'd do something like that."

"Neither one of us imagined they'd make such a...statement," Plutarch moved closer to Seneca. "We were doing what we agreed upon...saving the girl."

"Well, you saved her." Finnick stared Seneca down. "Now what?"

"President Snow is furious," Seneca's candle flickered.

"Is he planning on killing *them* or their *families*?" Finnick asked as though it was an either or and because he knew Haymitch couldn't bring himself to ask the question.

"Right now...neither. Truth is...I'm the one in danger." They all turned their heads towards Seneca. "Which I've accepted. I knew the moment I left those cameras on while Peeta was telling Katniss about the burnt bread...as soon as I told Claudius to stop them from eating that nightlock... it would be my head on the chopping block."

Plutarch rested a hand on Seneca's shoulder and paused before saying, "We all knew what we'd be risking when we got into this." He let his hand fall.

"Katniss and Peeta didn't know," Haymitch said quietly. "They had no idea."

"Katniss and Peeta..." Seneca released some air between his lips. "Together...they're unstoppable."

"I've got news for you; they're unstoppable separately too," Haymitch grunted. "They're strong kids."

"The way Snow sees it...they're stronger when they're together." Seneca informed him. "They provide a united front which he sees as dangerous to his regime." Seneca stepped forward and spoke. "The whole nation knows how much they care about each other. What they're willing to do no matter what the cost. Snow is looking at that as their downfall and we all know what he does to those you love. Fortunately he can't kill them...yet. He'd turn them into martyrs. He can kill their families, but that might cause Katniss and Peeta to seek revenge. The only thing left is to use them against one another."

Haymitch looked at the three men standing around him. "What are you saying here?"

Seneca wasn't sure how to explain it. "Snow needs to save face with the public, hence they need to keep up the romance in the public eye, but once they're home... He has spies...surveillance. He'll know their every move and trust me when I say he'll be watching them. Jointly, he's afraid they'll start havoc amongst the districts. If they separate they'll appear weaker."

Plutarch stepped forward and said, "They'll need to keep up the appearance of being the Star Crossed Lovers while the cameras are rolling, but when they stop..."

"Hell no!" Haymitch yelled so loudly he blew his candle out. "I will not break those kids apart," he said between clenched teeth.

"You will if you want this rebellion to succeed," a female voice spoke from behind Haymitch causing him to turn around. "That idiot girl just couldn't let him die, could she? Things would be a lot easier for us if we only had to worry about her. Now we've got both of them we've got to watch out for. How do you expect us to do that?"

"Johanna, just because we lost everyone, doesn't mean they have to..." Haymitch spat at her.

"She's right, Haymitch." Plutarch's voice was remorseful. "We can keep them safer if they don't pose as much of a threat."

"And together, they're a threat," Haymitch finished for him. "What gives you the impression that they'll be any safer if they're apart?"

"If talk about their actions dies down in the Capitol, then we'll know. If it doesn't...." Plutarch let his answer trail off.

"Prior to entering the arena, the girl barely had any feelings for Peeta. I'm sure she'll survive without him for a little while." Finnick tried to help Haymitch through.

Haymitch blew out an exasperating breath and said, "That's not entirely true." The inquisitive expressions around the room caused him to explain further. "They were already a couple prior to the Games. Peeta and I thought it would be best to keep that under wraps though. You know..." Haymitch shrugged his shoulders. "...thought the audience would like the whole unrequited love thing."

"Then there's no point in hiding it." Finnick went back to his spot against the wall. "If everyone knew about them beforehand..."

"They didn't. Katniss and Peeta hid their romance. According to Peeta, no one knew about their relationship except a couple of their friends."

"How many friends?" Plutarch wondered aloud.

"Two, but Peeta assured me they wouldn't say a word about it."

"Oh yeah...teenagers that don't gossip." Johanna rolled her eyes.

"That's realistic." Johanna's head dropped back and she let out a frustrated breath towards the ceiling. "Snow thinks they present more of a danger to the Capitol if they're in love...if they keep up this whole doing anything for each other shit. What do you think would happen when he decides to use that against them? Think they'll survive if Peeta's used as a male whore in the Capitol or if Katniss is on every man's wish list? He's going to take away everything they have if he thinks they pose a threat to him and right now they do!"

"Meanwhile *we're* the ones taking away their lives?" Haymitch could feel his teeth clenching together. "What makes us so different from Snow?" He turned on Johanna, "Answer that!"

"Snow wants to kill *everything* that threatens him," She glared at him.

"Oh, and what are we doing?" Haymitch had almost wished they would've eaten the berries. "We might as well kill them if we ask them to do this. Those kids fought to stay alive for each other! Each other! You really think anything I say can keep them apart? You're asking me to damage them...to take from them what was taken from us. From all of us!" He directed his words to his fellow mentors.

"Who gives a shit?" Johanna yelled. "Who cares about their love life? I could give a rat's ass. I care about those twenty-two kids that died in that arena. The people getting whipped because they look at a Peacekeeper wrong. The people in our districts starving to death!"

That's what I care about. And if those two had any conscience, they'd care about it too."

"And I'm supposed to tell them to end it? After all they've been through?"

"For a little while, yes. Eventually Snow knows he'll have to let them play their roles. He doesn't want to be made a fool." Plutarch's quiet response interrupted the mentor's screams.

"He's already a fool," Johanna murmured. "Haymitch I know what it's like to lose someone you love...I don't wish that on Katniss or Peeta, but we need them both alive. People in my district are finally rallying together. They've seen what two poor little tributes can do and fears of rebelling are starting to fade. They want to fight, but they won't if something happens to those two. And Snow will make an example out of Katniss and Peeta if he sees them as too much of a threat. If he thinks they're just playing for the cameras, he won't worry as much."

"That's an awfully big assumption." Haymitch's words were full of contempt.

"Johanna's not alone in this thinking," Finnick walked behind the woman. "The rest of the mentors have talked about it and most of them feel the same way."

"Most of them?"

"A few of us don't agree," Finnick answered. "Some of us think we should just let them live their lives."

"Kiss ass," Johanna flashed Finnick an evil eye.

"I'm not trying to kiss anyone's ass, Johanna, but I don't think it will do any good keeping them apart. As a matter of fact, I think it could hurt us more if they *don't* keep up appearances while they're home."

Finnick tried to speak for the rebels that held his same theories. "You know as well as I do that the cameras are always on in the districts. What is Snow going to do if he thinks those two played him for an idiot in front of the whole country?" Finnick thought for a second and said, "A lot of us feel they're not safe no matter what they do. Separate or together, they're on Snow's watch list. If they're together, at least they'll stand some kind of a chance against him."

"How many think they should break apart when they get back to Twelve?" Haymitch spun on his heels towards Johanna. "And don't lie to me. You know I'll find out."

Johanna gave him a roll of her eyes and said, "Most of us, but Finnick was right. Not everyone believes it will keep them safer."

"But you do?"

"I don't think any of us are safe...ever." There was ice in Johanna's voice.

"Snow's going to be monitoring them constantly. He'll never let them get away with any of this. Katniss and Peeta are either a threat as a couple or they made a fool out of him for 'faking' a romance in the arena. Either way, they're dead." Haymitch's fingers began trembling at Seneca's words.

"True." Plutarch agreed. "It's only a matter of time before Snow makes his move. What that is...no one knows. Trying to use them against one another is his only option. He won't risk any direct attacks on their families."

"Prim's become quite popular amongst everyone in the Capitol. I don't think he'd touch her," Finnick added.

"There's no love lost between Peeta and his mother so..." Haymitch shrugged.

"That's why the mutts were created. To see if they'd be willing to sacrifice the ones they loved for each other," there was a sense of embarrassment in Seneca's expression.

"Those mutts were a disgrace." Johanna walked up to Seneca and spit next to his foot.

Seneca didn't flinch. He was used to her outbursts. She and one other mentor had been the only ones that knew of his identity over the past few years. It was how they were able to communicate the goings on in the districts. "The mutations were originally designed to be the dead tributes from this year's Games...until I received word from Snow. He wanted me to change them to their family and friends."

"And Effie? What was the purpose of that?" Haymitch knew it was meant as a threat to the escort, but he needed to know what the Capitol's views on her were.

"She's become a sympathizer. Those are just as dangerous as rebels. More so. They have a tendency to quietly speak their minds and eventually, people listen. Effie's a prime example of getting people to listen to her. How many sponsors did she manipulate during the Games?"

"A lot," Haymitch ran a clammy hand down his face.

"Has she ever done that before? Has any escort? They're suppose to recommend sponsors...work the party, not sign them up and don't tell

me for one minute that you were the one that came up with that picnic. You wouldn't know a piece of fine china if it hit you in the face." Plutarch accused Haymitch.

"No, she was the one, but I signed them up. I signed all of them up."

"You had to. That's your job, but how much did she work them? It's no secret Haymitch. Her regrets about her actions during the reaping. It's her job to pull out those names and she blamed herself for Katniss and Peeta being in the arena." Seneca remembered hearing the recordings of Effie's emotional upheavals. "She pitied Peeta after hearing about his mother and to top it off she sent in an Avox to spy on them while they were hospitalized!"

Haymitch should've stopped Effie, but he hadn't been thinking. Feeling that much sympathy for a tribute by an employee of the Capitol could be considered treason.

"No one knows if she's loyal...including the Capitol," Seneca said.

"She's loyal!" Haymitch surprised himself by wanting to protect the woman he had spent over a decade despising .

"The question is...where does her loyalty lie?" Plutarch had concern written on his face. He had known Effie Trinket since she was young woman trying to make her way in the Games. He had suggested her for the escort position before any serious talks of a rebellion had started. His hope was that Effie's strict demeanor would help Haymitch with his alcohol consumption. Unfortunately, he had been wrong.

"I'm here to tell you, there will be serious repercussions for what they did in that arena. Between Peeta's apologies to the tributes he killed, making the Capitol look like the monsters in the arena, Katniss saving Thresh...burying Rue in flowers..." Seneca's eyes bore into

Haymitch's. "...the berries... I won't be the only one to have to answer for this year's Games." Seneca sighed as he said, "Your escort hasn't made any new friends with her subtle commentaries either. Right now, we've all got to be extra cautious."

"Maybe we should be bringing Effie into the rebellion?" Finnick said dryly. He saw the deadly glares from around the room and said, "Forget I said anything."

"Effie Trinket is the last person I'd trust." Johanna said with disgust. "Big deal, she helped you and she fell for the whole romance crap your tributes were dishing out..." she faced Haymitch. "...but she'll be back to her old self once they're gone and we all know it." Haymitch hoped Johanna was right for Effie's sake. Johanna was sick of them worrying about the flighty escort. "Look! We're getting nowhere! We need to decide what we're going to do about this Katniss and Peeta situation?"

Finnick took in everything that was being said and came to a conclusion. "What we really need here is time to organize the uprising."

"It's already organized." Johanna questioned Finnick with her eyes.

"I know that, Johanna. What I'm saying is...maybe we need to move things up. Pick up the pace a little. Then Katniss and Peeta won't have to be in danger for too long."

"That's not a bad idea, Finnick." Plutarch patted the man on the shoulder. "We can move up the deadline. District 8 is almost ready. They've got a few things left to do, but..."

"Move it up to when?" Seneca asked.

Haymitch hated himself for what he was about to say. "The Victory Tour. It's perfect timing for a practice run. Katniss and Peeta will be making visits to every district, so no one would question the crowds in the square. If we wait until the Quarter Quell as planned..." Haymitch began shaking his head.

"No." Finnick said with certainty. "Katniss and Peeta cannot come back to the Capitol as mentors. I don't want to imagine what type of revenge Snow could come up with by then."

They all nodded their agreement.

"In the meantime, you'll need to talk to Katniss and Peeta about laying low." Seneca said. "If they act as though their romance was simply a rouse...Snow would be spending his time trying to figure out their motives in the Games instead of plotting his retribution. Keep the kids apart in public unless the cameras are on. By doing that, Snow won't think they were trying to make a mockery of him."

"And in private? Do you know if their houses are wired?" Haymitch directed his questions to Seneca.

"All the victors houses are bugged but two," Seneca grinned. "There have been some technical difficulties with them. Sorry. We weren't expecting three victors to live in your village this year."

Haymitch had to smile at Seneca's deception. Haymitch knew his house had been free of listening devices, but for his telephone, so he ripped it out of the wall. "You'll have to let me know which home is safe. I'll make sure I direct one of them to it." Haymitch still wasn't sure how he'd get Katniss and Peeta to agree to their temporary separation. "It's useless thinking they'll break up over this. They won't do it." Haymitch knew his pair of kids would never let the Capitol get in

the middle of their relationship. They had proved that with their actions in the Games.

"Make them do it," Johanna took the candle out of Haymitch's hand and lit it with her own.

"Talk to Katniss. It's obvious the girl will do anything to protect Peeta," Finnick suggested.

"Anything but live without him. I don't think the girl will go for it."

"Why not show them the bigger picture? Let them know it's not just them they have to worry about anymore. There's a nation at risk." Plutarch put the question out there for all of them to ponder.

"You mean...tell them about the rebellion?" Haymitch arched his brow.

"Do you think they'd be willing to fight for their country as hard as they were willing to fight for each other?" Plutarch asked.

"I don't know." Now what? Haymitch thought to himself. He had two scenarios playing out in front of him. President Snow was threatened by the unanimity Katniss and Peeta showed in their convictions while in the arena, and if they're not together then they're weaker? Yeah...he could see Katniss buckling without Peeta. Not when she entered the Games, but after all they'd been through, he could see how being apart from him would break her. Peeta? He wondered. Peeta had been in love with Katniss for years and never said a word, so he should be used to watching her from a distance, but would he be willing to give her up for the safety of a nation? The safety of his family? Haymitch couldn't make any assumptions on Peeta's part, but if it meant saving Katniss, Peeta would do what he had to. Even pretend not to love her. "Peeta's the one we need right now. Katniss can't know about the rebellion. Not yet. She's too important to the

cause. Peeta on the other hand...even if he got captured that boy wouldn't say a word if he thought it might hurt Katniss."

"Then I guess we know what you have to do," Seneca sighed. "If all goes as planned, Katniss and Peeta can live safely away from District 12 and out of Snow's reach before the Quell."

Haymitch hated the steps he was about to take, but his comrades had been right. The nation needed Katniss and Peeta's united front. They were inspiring people from all across the districts to stand up against the Capitol. Against Snow. "I'll talk to Peeta before we head home."

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"You look great, sweetheart." Haymitch almost looked happy, Katniss thought. Not handsome, regardless of the bright red bowtie he was wrangled into wearing, but not as angry, or drunk as normal.

"Thanks," Katniss didn't bother smiling at him. She had no desire to. She wanted Peeta and in order to see him, Haymitch had to be introduced. "When are they calling you on?"

"In a hurry to get rid of me?"

"In a hurry to see Peeta," she didn't recognize the sound of her own voice. It was flat...emotionless an absolute contrast to the way she was feeling.

"I can tell. You seem to be overflowing with anticipation."

Katniss' natural scowl and icy eyes shut him up. "It's taking forever."

"What do you say you give your mentor a hug for luck?"

Katniss lifted her eyebrow, but stopped the snarl she was about to pass him. Haymitch asking for a hug was like Effie asking to become a resident of their district. "Sure," she leaned into him and felt his lips moving against her, now working, ear.

"You do love him, right?"

She pulled herself back and said, "Of course I do." Katniss wondered why he would ask such a thing. He was acting awfully strange. Though he had the appearance of a pleased mentor, Katniss felt like there was something amiss.

"Don't be afraid to show it." Haymitch smiled at her. It was as phony as Effie's hair. Now she knew there was something wrong. Haymitch doesn't smile. Not at her at least. He had been looking into her eyes as though he was trying to convey a silent message.

"Oh, I won't be." If Haymitch was smiling, Katniss was sure she should be too. "He'll know exactly how I feel." She straightened the bowtie he was wearing. "I don't think I could hide my feelings from anyone in the country." The melodic tone in her voice made her wonder what had happened to the girl that had been there just a second ago.

Haymitch flashed his cocky grin, a real one and winked at her. "This is your night, sweetheart. Enjoy it."

Katniss watched him as he faded away into the darkness that surrounded them. Was Haymitch under some sort of impression that she didn't love Peeta? After everything that happened...everything she said in the arena, had he really been questioning her feelings? A million questions ran through her head. Why did he have to remind me to show Peeta how I feel? Well, she answered herself; do you normally put your emotions on display for the entire nation to see? Wasn't it you that swore you wouldn't let them be privy to yours and

Peeta's relationship? It's a little bit late for that now, she thought. Why would Haymitch do this to her? She wanted to run after him and shake him senseless. Granted she hadn't planned on pouring out her heart in front of the entire nation tonight, she was saving that until they were alone together, but she knew she wouldn't be able to hide her love for Peeta anymore. It was glaringly obvious, wasn't it? Peeta believed it, didn't he? Yes. He knew. He believed in her love for him. Katniss smiled to herself. Of course he knew. It was apparent by the message Cinna had delivered to her when he saw her in the hospital. Had Cinna told her Peeta said, I love you, it wouldn't have made as much of an impact as the message he sent. Funny, she thought, how three *strangelittle* words could hold so much meaning. It was Peeta's way of saying he loved her and he didn't want anyone else to know what he was saying. It was meant for her alone. Standing underneath the stage in complete darkness, Katniss felt much of the tension Haymitch had caused her, dissipate as she remembered Peeta's words. She was going to see him any minute now. Haymitch had been introduced and the crowd was going wild. We're next. We're next. We're next, Katniss kept repeating the words in her head until she felt the platform rising. Her eyes lifted up when she saw the opening above her head. The crowd was getting louder. Her heart was beating faster. Don't be afraid to show Peeta she loved him? Hah! "I'm going to make a complete fool of myself whether I like it or not," she whispered to herself as she felt the cool air from the City Center flit across the top of her hair.

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Peeta couldn't breathe. He could hear the crowd going wild above him as he stood below the stage in the Capitol's City Center. Haymitch's

words kept echoing through his head. "They're not happy with you, kid. With either of you."

"Why? Because we didn't die?" He asked Haymitch

"Peeta, this is serious." Haymitch had taken him to the wind chime area of the Tribute Center's roof. "Whatever you do...make sure you play up the Star Crossed Lovers bit."

"I'm not playing," he glared at Haymitch. "Neither is Katniss."

"You're wrong, boy. You'll always be playing the Game," Haymitch's warning reverberated through him.

A soft voice interrupted his thoughts. "Are you ready, Peeta?" The last time Portia asked him that was the morning he and Katniss entered the arena.

Peeta's eyes lit up the dark area. "Yeah. I'm ready." A stark contrast to the answer he had before.

Portia wrapped her arms loosely around his shoulders. "I'm so proud of you," she whispered into his ear.

"Thanks, Portia." He squeezed her back. "I just wish they'd hurry up already. I need to see her." Though hugging Portia was comforting in its own way, Peeta was desperate to feel Katniss in his arms. He needed her strength. Her confidence. He needed her.

"You will," the stylist grinned. "I'll see you soon." She left the area to take her place with Cinna and their prep teams.

The clicking sound of his cane tapping against the side of the platform echoed through his tiny space. Time felt as though it were dragging on. Click click click, his cane was tapping at the wood like the hands of

a clock. Haymitch had told him he wanted to take him out earlier, to celebrate, but Peeta didn't want to go anywhere. All he wanted to do was see Katniss. Make sure she was all right. He kept giving Haymitch excuses as to why he should just stay at the Tribute Center, but Haymitch shot them all down and Peeta went along. Peeta was afraid they'd be recognized when they walked through the streets of the Capitol, but Haymitch wore a yellow wig and put him in a bright blue wig. That combined with the cane and no one knew who they were.

When he first walked into their familiar domain at the Tribute Center earlier in the day, he had expected Katniss to be there, but Haymitch informed him that she wouldn't be returning there until after their live reunion. He could care less whether or not the nation wanted to see them come together for the first time since the arena. He didn't care that the Gamemakers were angry with them. He and Katniss were willing to die together. If the Gamemakers didn't want them alive, they should've let them eat the damn berries, he thought to himself. But there was so much more at risk than just him and Katniss now. He wished Katniss had let him die. Instead she saved his life. He tapped the cane against his new leg. Every time he touched his leg, he expected nothing to register, but it did. It felt like his old leg...without the gashes and a bit more sensitive. Fortunately it hadn't gone numb today like it had the day before. Peeta could barely walk on it for almost two hours and the over accentuated feeling of his foot being asleep caused him to fall several times.

He took a moment and smiled when he thought of Portia's visit to him at the medical center and the message he sent through her.

"I heard you needed to see me," Portia entered his hospital room as he was walking around the large quarters trying out his new leg.

"Thought you'd need to see the new me...you know...in case you have to make some adjustments to my clothes or something," Peeta lifted up his cane and tapped his false leg. The cold from the silver cane against his prosthetic caused a ripple of electricity to run up his leg.

"As a matter of fact, I do." Portia walked up to him with an electronic devise and scanned his body with it. "There we go. I've got your new measurements now." She stood to his side and said, "Good thing too. I'm going to have to take in your pants."

"Yeah, I've dropped a few pounds." Peeta grinned at her. "Effie says I'm too skinny."

"You are," Portia smiled at him.

"Has Cinna seen Katniss yet?"

Portia could hear the expectancy in his voice. "He has. He'll be going back there later on today to get her measurements." She saw his eyes light up with excitement.

"Don't suppose you could..." Peeta wasn't sure if they were being listened to or not.

"Would you like me to ask Cinna to send your regards?"

The grin that lifted the corner of his mouth answered her question. He reached out to her and hugged her. "Thanks, Portia."

"Of course."

Peeta had been thinking about something he could tell Katniss. A message that could be sent to her that she'd understand. He wanted to tell her he loved her, but he didn't want her to hear it from someone

else's mouth and then it hit him. He knew exactly what message he could send to Katniss so she'd know he was okay...he was missing her...he loved her. Peeta lifted his hand to cover his words and whispered it into Portia's ear, "Read my lips."

"Seriously?" Portia's quizzical stare was nothing new to him.

"Yup."

"Okay," she walked towards the door and turned to him. "You two really have a strange dialogue," she chuckled as she left.

Click click click. The rapping of the cane against the wood underneath the stage brought him out of his fog. He heard the Capitol's audience going wild as Haymitch was introduced and he knew he and Katniss would be next. Here he was...standing at a precipice, not knowing what steps to take next. The Capitol's threats were lingering in the air. Katniss was in an area similar to his waiting for him. His heart was racing as the platform started to rise. The day the Games started he felt an overwhelming sense of fear and anticipation. He was going to fight for Katniss' life that day. Those emotions were nothing compared to how he was feeling at that moment. It wasn't just Katniss' life he held in his hands now. It was their families. Their friends. Their entire district. The entire country. "Let the Games begin," he whispered to himself as the floor of the stage opened up for his grand entrance.

74th Hunger Games

Challenge: We

Always Were Chapter 27: One More Time, a hunger games fanfic | FanFiction

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

By: Jamie Sommers

Chapter Twenty-seven: One More Time...

Sigh... This is the final chapter of the story. Please look for my new story, *Catching Fire: Rekindling*, the sequel. As far as Gale is concerned...don't fret. What fun is reading a story if you get all the answers in one chapter? This is dedicated to all my readers and to S and A...yay! It's done. Now on to...

74th Hunger Games Challenge: We Always Were

The crowd in the town square had been overwhelming. Gale stood with his and Katniss' families watching as each member of the District 12 team walked onto the stage. His eyes scanned the crowd of people around him, several times, until they landed on the person he was looking for. The baker had been in the square, celebrating Peeta and Katniss' victory with his entire family. They gave each other a nod from

across the jam packed square and turned their attention to the giant television screen.

"Ladies and Gentlemen! He won the Games with, not twenty-four, but forty-eight tributes in the arena! Now he's brought home not one, but *two* victors! District 12 mentor, Haymitch Abernathy!" Caesar Flickerman's teeth were exceptionally bright tonight thought Gale, and Haymitch isn't wearing something dingy. Gale had seen him many times in the Hob and every time he saw the man, he swore he was wearing the same clothes. Considering he had more money than everyone in their district combined, he thought the man should've dressed better.

Prim jumped up and down and clapped her hands. The entire crowd in District 12 was going nuts over Haymitch. The Capitol was going crazy for the man too. Gale's eyes were sparkling as he thought of the next introduction. Catnip. They hadn't heard anything about her for days. Gale stopped by her mother's house, thinking the Capitol...Haymitch...someone would've called the woman to tell her how her daughter was, but she hadn't heard a thing. The cameramen were back in District 12 too. They had done some interviews and now they were filming everyone's reactions to the crowning of Katniss and Peeta. The second a live feed of District 12 flashed in the corner of the screen below Haymitch's image, the crowd around Gale went wild. People were jumping, shouting, cheering... Gale's younger sister was sitting on top of his brother's shoulders. She couldn't see anything from her vantage point on the ground, now she had one of the best seats in the house. Gale noticed Prim standing on her tip toes trying to make out what was happening on television and he hauled her up to his shoulders. "How's that, Prim?"

"Better!" Within a few seconds Prim's face replaced the scene from District 12. "I'm on television, mom!"

"Yes you are!" Her mother looked up at her with a big smile. In all the years Gale knew the woman he had never seen her look so happy. He had never seen anyone in his district look this happy.

"Wave, Prim!" Gale called up to her. Speaking in a normal tone of voice was useless tonight; they had to scream to be heard above the roar of the crowd.

Prim followed Gale's instructions and the crowd went crazy once again.

Haymitch was waiving to the crowd and nodding his head as opposed to bowing like some of the others had done during their introductions. After a couple of minutes he looked like he had had enough of it and headed for his seat.

Caesar began hushing up the Capitol's audience and the noise from the town square started to subdue. "Please. Please." Caesar said to the audience and made a motion with his hands as if to lower their volume down. "Let's quiet down now." The audience's roar lowered down as did the crowd in the square. "She captured our hearts when she volunteered for her sister at the reaping. *He* captured ours when he declared his lifelong love for her on *this very stage*." Caesar accentuated the words by pointing at the stage below him. The crowd started getting louder as did the host. "And we were all on the edge of our seats as they risked their lives for one another...for love! Ladies and Gentlemen!" Everyone started screaming as Caesar dragged out the introduction. "The Star Crossed Lovers from District 12!" Gale was shaking with anticipation. "Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark!"

Gale could feel Prim's body bouncing up and down on his shoulders. His eyes were glued to the television screen as Katniss' and Peeta rose from below the stage and made their grand entrance. Gale wasn't sure if it was Katniss at first, the girl standing across from

Peeta looked so young and innocent, but he recognized her eyes. The way she held her shoulders back, defiant. As if daring those around to challenge her. Catnip, you're always so tough, he thought to himself. They can put you in a pretty dress, but that won't change who you really are inside. Gale thought if they really wanted to capture Katniss, they'd set her on fire again.

"Wow! She looks so beautiful!" Prim yelled.

Yeah, thought Gale. She does. He was certain that she and Peeta would probably run and jump into each others arms. That's what he'd do if he were waiting for her, but they didn't. Gale didn't think their greeting would get to him as much as it did, but he felt like Prim was bouncing on his stomach and not his shoulders anymore at the sight of them. He closed his eyes as everyone around him celebrated their reunion. Gale couldn't bear to watch.

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Katniss licked her lips.

Peeta tapped his cane.

She tugged at the hem of her yellow blouse.

He fidgeted with his belt buckle.

The sound was deafening. The lights blinding.

The first thing I'm going to do is grab you and kiss the hell out of you, thought Peeta. Then he saw her.

Katniss wanted to jump into Peeta's arms the second she laid her eyes on him and then...he was there.

The roar of the crowd that had just echoed through their ears vanished. The blinding, hot lights from the stage faded. Nothing existed. There was no one they could see or hear. Just each other.

They stood perfectly still for almost ten seconds just looking at each other. Katniss took a step towards him and Peeta a step towards her. She didn't notice his cane as she walked up to him. She didn't notice anything, but his eyes and the way they were looking at her. She placed her hand against his heart; he rubbed a skein of her hair between his fingers.

"Hi," she breathed out on a whisper.

"Hi," he blinked in slow motion. They rested their foreheads against one another's and briefly closed their eyes. He breathed in her scent as he tilted his head to the side and placed a soft kiss against her lips. "You're here," he whispered to her. She nodded her head slowly. Their lips met once again in a slow and effortless kiss. Her arms wrapped around his body. He pulled her against him by her waist with his free arm and braced himself up on his cane with the other.

"I love you," she spoke into his mouth between their kiss.

"I love you too," he answered her.

Their lips became feverish and slick with their confessions of love. Time ticked by and they paid no attention to it. They didn't know how long they had been standing there, kissing each other, saying I love you over and over again. Neither one cared. Their heads twisted from side to side. Their bodies melted into the others. Then Caesar Flickerman tried to break them apart.

It was then that Peeta remembered where he was. The whole nation was watching them. He continued kissing Katniss and pushed Caesar away. Peeta could hear the crowd going crazy for his actions, but the truth was he wasn't ready to stop kissing Katniss yet. He didn't give one iota about the Capitol audience or Caesar Flickerman, but the sound of the audience slowly penetrated their reunion and Haymitch came over to pull them apart.

"All right. All right. Enough you two," their mentor practically pushed them to a loveseat, as opposed to the throne that previous years victors sat upon, sitting on the stage.

Katniss wanted to tell Haymitch to go to hell, but she couldn't seem to wipe the smile off of her face. Peeta was here. He was holding her hand and limping. She took notice of the metal cane he was using to help himself walk. She immediately made him sit down first and then sat as close to him as humanly possible. He was stunning. Beautiful. His skin was glowing, his smile as striking as the day he looked up at her from the mud. He was wearing a pair of black pants with black boots and a soft, buttery colored shirt. His rosy cheeks shone and his eyes glistened as they looked at her. Katniss was sure that all of Panem could hear her heart sigh as she looked at him.

Peeta couldn't believe his eyes. He had never seen Katniss look so...innocent. If only people knew, he thought, this dress suits her more than any other one Cinna designed for her in the past. The world knew her as the girl on fire, but her flame wasn't always burning hot. Inside, she was soft...sweet, she had gentleness to her that she rarely let people see. Yes, Cinna knew what he was doing when he put her in this dress, he thought. She's still on fire, but it's not burning white hot. It's a shimmering glow. Peeta's eyes glanced down her form, appreciating the soft creation she was in and he smiled when he saw Katniss' expression. He could just imagine her saying, 'can you

believe this thing? I'd rather be wearing your clothes than my own.' He lifted his arm and wrapped it around her. The warmth of her body radiated through his skin. Holding her was so natural. He remembered her telling him that he felt like an extension of her. He completely understood where she was coming from. Since he regained consciousness in the hospital, he had felt as though a piece of him was missing, and it wasn't his leg either. It was Katniss. He had no clue how he was going to face his future without her, but he put those thoughts to the back of his mind. Right now she was his and he was going to cherish every minute with her.

"Good thing you've got a mentor like Haymitch or else we could be here for another hour waiting for you two to stop kissing," Caesar joked with them.

"You would've been here all night," Peeta joked back and everyone laughed.

Caesar's face got serious as he said, "Congratulations to the both of you. Now!" He flashed his overly large white teeth to the crowd. "Let's see their story of triumph...of loss..." Caesar's expression changed with each word. "...of love!" His hand gestured to the large television screen.

The moment the seal appeared on the screen Katniss wanted to run. She had just lived through this year's Games, why would she want to watch it? Her fingers automatically reached for the hand that Peeta had lying in his lap and his arm tightened around her shoulders, pulling her closer against his body as if shielding her from what was about to be replayed on the screen.

Peeta had no desire to sit through the recap of the Games, but it was all part of the Capitol's unwavering manipulation of the districts. Win the Games; rehash it for the rest of your lives. They never wanted you

to forget they were the ones in control. And control is exactly what the Capitol had in mind when it came to he and Katniss. He should've just stepped into the lake and drowned himself. Let his leg bleed out. Let the blood poisoning take over his body and kill him, he thought. Instead he thought of only himself. How his life would be without Katniss in it. What he would do if she had died. He never stopped to say to himself, maybe she was right? Maybe living a life like everyone else is just too dangerous. Love is dangerous. The scene playing out on the screen pulled him from his thoughts. Katniss was screaming out Prim's name during their reaping and then she volunteered. Peeta's name had been called. He flicked his eyes across the stage at Effie and noticed her clenching her lips together. Haymitch needed to warn her as well, Peeta thought. How many lives have Katniss and I affected by our actions in the arena? Katniss had set herself up as a threat the moment she took Prim's place in the Games and, without realizing it, he had made her stand out even more. He thought he could save her life. He thought he had been helping.

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"There you are," Effie walked across the roof of the Tribute Center. "I've been looking for you."

"Sorry. I just wanted some air," Katniss wrapped her arms around herself as she stood in the center of the wind chime garden. She had broken every rule imaginable by going to the roof prior to their live reunion show, but Peeta hadn't been there and Effie was grateful.

"You'll be in a world of trouble if they find out you tried to see him, you know?" Effie chided Katniss.

"I just wanted some air, Effie." Katniss snapped at the escort. "Is it a crime now to breathe fresh air?"

"No," Effie wondered if she should say anything. If she were going to, it had to be now, she thought. They won't get another chance to have their words drowned out by the tinkling of the wind chimes. "Katniss?" Effie placed a hand on her arm. "You must know...I never wanted this to happen. Any of it."

"Any of what?" Katniss focused on the clouds floating above.

Effie knew the words she was about to speak could get her turned into one of the Avox that served them, but she couldn't hold her tongue. Hmph, a thought flashed through her mind, that's probably why they cut their tongues out, because they can't hold them. And yet you're going to open your mouth aren't you, Effie Trinket? She blew out a burst of air through her nose and pressed her lips together. "I never thought about the lives of a tribute outside of the arena. For years Haymitch had been telling me they're not tributes, they're someone's children. I never understood his meaning until this year." Effie saw Katniss' quizzical expression. "Until I met you and Peeta." She fluttered her pink lashes and said, "I'm sorry I called Prim and Peeta's names. Sorry I called out anyone's name for that matter." Effie's brow wrinkled. "I couldn't do anything about it...about your entering the Games, but I can do something now." She paused then added, "You're in a world of trouble over the berries, Katniss. It looked like you were defying the Capitol when you did that and now you both..." Effie covered her lips with her fingers.

"I wasn't trying to make a political statement, Effie." Katniss stood face to face with the escort. "Peeta and I...we couldn't do it. We couldn't kill each other and we didn't want to live without each other. We had no alternative."

"Can you honestly say that defying them never once crossed your mind?" Effie put up her hand to stop her from speaking. "Don't answer that. I don't want to know." She stepped closer to Katniss and lowered her voice even more than it had already been. "You must be careful now. Both of you." Effie looked around the roof of the Training Center. "Sneaking up here to see Peeta prior to the show was an impetuous notion and one that could get you into a heap more trouble. Please, Katniss...for your sake and Peeta's, follow the rules."

Katniss followed Effie back to the eight floor suite where they had been staying until after the live show. "Effie?" Katniss stopped the woman from entering her quarters with her voice. "Thanks for the lamb stew."

"Well," Effie flustered. "Haymitch sent that in, not I."

Katniss rolled her eyes and gave her a little grin. "Thanks for the stew, Effie. For everything."

Effie nodded at her and accepted her thanks. She wondered if she had done the right thing by giving Katniss a warning. Effie hadn't heard Haymitch say anything, but she could sense there was something going on by the way the Gamemakers reacted to her and Haymitch when they expressed their gratitude for their hard work during the Games. The sponsors were ever so grateful she and Haymitch had taken the time to say thank you, but the Gamemakers looked as though they were aggravated by them. Effie could only assume it was due to Katniss' actions in the arena with the berries. When she had seen them on television and what they were about to do, it didn't register with Effie the significance of what they were doing...saying. It hadn't been until she overheard a few of the sponsors making a comment about showing up the Gamemakers, that Effie allowed herself to face all of their actions during the Games.

She waited until Katniss' prep team took her into their custody and sought out Haymitch. He and Peeta were back from wherever they had disappeared to and up on the roof of the Tribute Center.

"Peeta?" Effie smiled at him.

"Effie!" He hobbled towards her and she walked into his hug. "I've missed you."

"Oh," Effie made a flippant hand gesture to him. "You just saw me a couple of days ago."

"My head was still a little foggy from the anesthetic." He squeezed her tightly. "Listen, thanks for everything. Katniss and I really appreciate all your hard work."

Effie found it endearing that Peeta included Katniss in his gratitude. "I was merely doing my job."

"I know," Peeta winked at her. "Thanks just the same. Is she here?"

"She's staying somewhere else until after the show tonight." Haymitch answered. Effie wanted to tell him he had just missed her, but she couldn't bring herself to do it.

He turned to Haymitch and said, "Guess I better go meet up with my prep team. Got to look handsome for Katniss."

Effie waited until he was gone and walked to the familiar noise of the chimes. Thankfully Haymitch followed her lead. They stood silently for a few seconds before Effie asked, "How much trouble are we in?"

"A lot." Haymitch didn't bat an eye. "But nothing that can't be fixed."

"How do you presume we fix this?"

"We don't fix anything. *You* need to forget about it and go back to..." Haymitch spun towards her. "Damn it, Effie. I never meant to get you into trouble."

"You didn't do a thing to me. I'm responsible for my own actions."

"Well, I didn't help any."

"So help me now," Effie suggested. "What do I do? Where do I go from here? Do you think they'll..." she lowered down her voice until it was barely above a whisper. "Will they turn me into an Avox?"

The thought had entered her mind over and over again and from the look on Haymitch's face, he had thought about it too. "I don't think so." Haymitch looked towards the side of the roof then back at Effie. "I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but...you need to go back to being one of them. Back to..." he lifted a piece of hair from her wig and dropped it. "...to getting your hair done and doing your nails and whatever else it is that you did before. Pretend like none of this happened. Like you were just doing your job and you could care less about those two kids."

"Tributes," she swallowed as she said it. "Those two tributes." It killed her to refer to Katniss and Peeta as though they were nothing more than an afterthought.

"That's right, Effie. Only they're victors now."

She nodded her head. "How do I do that, Haymitch? How do I act as though they didn't alter my life?"

"The same way you've been acting all the years that I've known you. You put on a smile and never let them see you sweat."

"They'll be watching me closely, then? To see what I do next."

"Probably," he answered.

Effie took it all in. At first she had just gotten caught up in Haymitch and Peeta's plan for the arena, but then her world seemed to rotate on its axis. Now Effie had to go back to afternoon luncheons with women she couldn't stand. Giggling as married men flirted with her. "On the bright side...I won't have to complain about my district anymore." She smiled at Haymitch. "Now I can rub it in all my fellow escort's faces. I've got *two* victors." She lifted her chin with pride.

"Make sure you take credit for that, Effie. For keeping me sober during the Games...things like that. Don't give away too much information, but..."

"I know how to behave." It took Effie aback as she said, "I've been behaving like a pretentious snob my whole life. I think I've mastered it by now."

"Welcome to the Games, Effie," Haymitch said with sorrow in his voice.

"May the odds be ever in your favor." As she headed to her quarters to prepare for the live show, she realized what a farce those words were.

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Peeta hoped Katniss wouldn't think less of him as they watched the recap of the Games. He heard her gasp when he jumped out of the forest and attacked the tribute from District 4. He stared at the television screen, but he wasn't watching the battle between himself

and the boy from Four, he lived it, no need to watch it. He kept focused on the box that had a live view of him and Katniss' reactions during their Games. He wondered what she thought of him as he plunged the knife into the boy and immediately dodged Marvel's spear; getting him in a choke hold, much like the one Cato took him into. He had expected her to be disgusted by his actions, regardless of their motivation, but she looked petrified instead. Peeta turned his attention to the screen and watched as he made his first contact with the Careers.

It was him, Katniss thought. Peeta had killed the boy from Four. She remembered the night she saw the male tribute's face in the sky and said a silent thank you to the person that killed him. Peeta. He had protected her from the very start of the Games. What were you thinking, she thought to herself. You could've gotten yourself killed. She didn't recognize Peeta when he spoke with the Careers until he smiled. He didn't look like himself. Had Katniss not known the reasons behind his alliance with them, she would've thought he was one of them. *"No matter what I say...no matter what I do...it's all for you."* She now understood why Peeta told her those words on the rooftop of the Tribute Center the night before the Games. It didn't take long before she saw Peeta's hidden agenda. The bow and arrows. How he had misled the Careers by telling Glimmer she had no clue how to use them. She squeezed Peeta's hand in her lap. They showed the Careers on their hunt and Katniss hiding up in the willow tree. The way the Careers tormented the girl from District 8 made Katniss sick to her stomach. She didn't know how Peeta was able to tolerate being with them for so long. Then they showed him going back to the dying girl. He was stroking her hair and whispering that he was sorry as he slit her throat. Katniss wondered what had happened before that. What he had said to get the girl to lay her head in his lap. It didn't surprise her. Peeta could talk anyone into anything. Katniss knew what the Careers were up to at that point, they were threatening to kill

Peeta while standing precariously close to her willow tree, but the Capitol didn't show the Careers' conversation. They showed him finding her snares and lifting them up for all to see. "Don't worry, Katniss. They won't find you. I swear it." Then his lips moved, 'I love you.' Even then he was speaking to her and not the audience. She watched as he deceived the Careers about the direction she had gone in. The moment they were out of sight Katniss hopped out from the tree and she saw Peeta's live reaction to how close they had been to her. His eyes closed and took a deep breath. "My God," he whispered from his seat next to her. Katniss squeezed his hand to comfort him. When she lifted the snares up to show the rabbit she had caught in the wire the Capitol audience went wild. If she were a viewer of the Games, this would be the part in which she'd realize that the real alliance was between herself and Peeta. Not him and the Careers.

The morning of the Careers' search for Katniss had been aired next and Peeta remembered how close the Careers had come to her that day. They showed her sitting on the rock and him filling up the water jugs.

"My God, I love you." His image was taking over half of the screen and the Capitol audience sighed their response to his admission of love.

Katniss sitting on a rock and holding a flower was taking up the other half of the screen. "It matches your eyes, Peeta." Peeta smiled at her words. He kept meaning to ask her what was on her mind that morning.

"What are you thinking about over there?" I was thinking about you, thought Katniss.

They turned from the screen to give each other a soft and loving smile.

Fireballs. Tracker jacker nests. Cato's fight with Peeta. Katniss cringed when she saw the sword slice through his leg. And then there was Rue.

Peeta watched as Katniss forged a friendship with the young girl. The way she blew up the Careers' supplies brought a grin to his face. But the deaths of his fellow tributes brought him back to reality. The Careers had taken out the boy from Ten while Katniss was unconscious. Cato snapped the boy from Three's neck and Katniss hid in a tree just a few yards away from them. Peeta couldn't help but wonder how angry Cato would be if he were the one sitting there watching the recap instead of him. There had been so many times that Katniss was right next to him and he had no clue. He watched as Marvel's spear entered Rue's body and blamed himself for her death once more. He wanted to feel bad that Marvel had died at the hands of Katniss, but after watching him kill Rue, there was no pity to be found. The sound of Katniss singing to the little girl caused Peeta to clear his throat multiple times. They didn't show Katniss' tribute to the girl by burying her in flowers, her receiving the bread from District 11 or their district's three finger salute she told him she had held up to the cameras for all the world to see. All of these things had Peeta's mind racing. Katniss had no idea what she was doing. From her volunteering for Prim, to these actions in the arena, Katniss had made herself a prime target for the Capitol to seek its revenge. A large part of the recap had been their time in the cave. Katniss caring for his injuries, Peeta begging her not to go to the feast. The sleep syrup Haymitch had sent in and Katniss' deceiving him in order to save his life. They showed Katniss going into the feast, they couldn't cut out her rescue of Thresh, though Peeta was certain if the Capitol had their way, they would've. Thresh killing Clove and Katniss racing through the woods back to Peeta. Then it was Peeta's turn to care for her. They cut out his harsh words for the Gamemakers when it started to rain, but left in his and Katniss' fight about the feast. They had even

showed what happened next in the sleeping bag. Peeta's eyes flashed to the box that held Katniss and his live reaction. Her face was beet red as was his. They had been certain no one could hear them at the time. They were so wrong. Their picnic of lamb stew. Foxface dying. They didn't show Peeta telling her he was sorry and he was grateful they didn't rehash it for too long. Killing that girl bothered the hell out of him. Killing all of them bothered him. Then there were the mutts. Now that Peeta could really see them, he understood why Katniss reacted the way she did when she saw the one that was supposed to be Prim. He had fallen victim to those huge puppy dog eyes many times in the meadow while they were picking herbs. He cursed the Gamemakers for doing such a thing to them. Cato's death was gruesome. The thought of Katniss having to look down at his mangled flesh, knowing he was still alive, made him want to wretch.

Here we go, thought Katniss. The berries. She had tried to watch their recap as though she were just any other viewer. Instead she saw it through the eyes of the Gamemakers. Through President Snow's eyes. She and Peeta, mostly her, had been a menace to the Capitol. She was surprised they didn't let them die by eating the berries. *"They have to have their victor, Katniss."* Peeta's words echoed through her mind. We forced them to have two. She was thankful they didn't show them lifting the berries to their lips or their being announced as the winners of the Games, but they did show her flinging herself against the glass that separated her from Peeta as his heart stopped. She didn't recognize herself. Her hair was a tatted mess. She was filthy and her hands, though she had washed them, were covered in blood.

President Snow stood above them with a crown in his hand and twisted it into two separate pieces. Peeta held his breath as the man placed it on his head. He smiled, the way he knew he should and could feel the man's stare piercing him. Snow threw a glance towards Katniss and Peeta could feel the man's hatred. Peeta's mind flashed

back to the warnings Haymitch gave him when they stood in the secret room. He watched as Snow placed the crown on Katniss' head and in that moment, Peeta knew what he had to do. Peeta would be breaking her heart, but it was the only way to keep them all safe.

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"Come. Come now. We need to make an impressive arrival," Effie bustled about Katniss and Peeta prior to their Victory Banquet.

"We're coming," Katniss lifted her eyes to Peeta's.

"It's a big big big day," Peeta whispered to Katniss in a false Capitol accent causing her to smile.

They were announced to the guests at the banquet and took their seats at their table. They were surrounded by everyone that had helped them during the Games. Their prep teams, Cinna, Portia, Haymitch and Effie. Katniss felt as though they were being put on display so everyone would know who needed to be punished by the Capitol.

"I'm surprised we're not eating lamb stew," Peeta leaned over to her and whispered.

"I think that might be a little too...unsophisticated for this type of event." Katniss tried to relax, but she couldn't. Effie's warning kept haunting her.

"Katniss! Peeta!" they lifted their eyes to a man and woman scurrying towards them. They were waiving as if they had been best friends for life.

"Hello," Peeta stood up and shook the man's hand. Katniss followed suit.

"Katniss. Peeta. Allow me to introduce to you two of your *very* generous sponsors," Effie stood up as did Haymitch. The four of them walked around their table, leaving their plates of food barely touched and greeted the sponsors.

"This is Quillan Vulgaris and his wife Lola *Primrose*," Effie flashed Katniss a smile and Haymitch flashed her a look that said, say something, sweetheart.

Peeta jumped on Effie's introduction. "Primrose?" He pulled Katniss close to him by her hand. "Can you believe that, Katniss?"

"What are the chances?" Katniss smiled and thought, pretty good if you live in District 12.

The sponsors fawned over them. Lola gushed over Peeta's admiration of her wedding china. "We had no clue you had such an eye for exquisite things, Peeta."

"They were stunning. Thank you for thinking about sending such a lavish gift to us. We adored them." Peeta squeezed Katniss' hand.

She took his hint and said, "Yes, Peeta was completely in love with the design. We both were." It was a frigging dish, Katniss thought to herself.

They spent their night putting on smiles, talking to sponsors and avoiding President Snow. Peeta caught the man's glance at times and felt his icy stare penetrate him when he looked at their clasped hands. There was never a moment in which they hadn't had someone next to them, talking to them, congratulating them. All of these strangers were

clueless, Peeta thought. You have no idea what's happening right now. No clue as to what our lives are going to become.

"The sun is coming up," Katniss said to Peeta as they dragged their feet to the elevator in the Tribute Center. Effie had gone to her quarters and left them on their own for the first time since they'd been in the arena.

"Yeah and I'm ready for bed." Peeta pulled her closer to him and kissed her head.

"Me too."

"Don't suppose you want company?" Peeta gave her a little smile.

"I might," Katniss rested her head against his shoulder as they rode the elevator to the twelfth floor.

"Let me grab some clothes and I'll meet you in your room."

"I said, *might*, Peeta." Katniss teased him.

"Fine," he sighed playing along with her. "I guess I'll have to find someone else to cuddle up with me."

Katniss rolled her head towards him and kissed his chin. "Not if you want to keep that other leg."

The second they stepped off of the elevator Haymitch pounced on them. "Were the hell have you two been? Doesn't matter. Peeta," Haymitch took him by the arm. "You need to go with Portia. She's got to do a fitting with you before the show today."

Portia had already fitted and finished Peeta's clothing for their interview that afternoon, so Peeta knew Haymitch must've needed to

Speak with him privately. He placed a kiss against Katniss' forehead. "Go to bed. I'll come in when we're through."

Frigid knives flew from Katniss' eyes towards Haymitch. "Don't take too long." Peeta pitied his mentor. He'd hate to be on the receiving end of that look.

Once Katniss was out of earshot Peeta asked, "What's up?"

"Portia's getting some air. Why don't we join her?"

Peeta followed Haymitch to the roof as soon as Katniss' bedroom door was closed. Cinna and Portia were standing in the center of the wind chimes. "I bet this area has never seen so much action," Peeta said as he stood in the noisy garden.

"Peeta, we won't have another chance to talk before you go," Portia gave him a sad smile.

"What have you decided, kid?" Haymitch asked.

"I'll do it." Committing to this decision was killing Peeta and he had no clue how he was going to explain his actions to Katniss. "But stop trying to keep us apart, Haymitch. We're only safe while we're here or when the cameras are rolling. At least let me have this time with her. Can you do that?" Peeta's eyes were hard when he looked at his mentor.

"Yeah, kid."

"Peeta, no one wants to keep you from spending time with Katniss," Cinna said softly. "We just needed to know your intentions."

Peeta felt as though his hand was being forced and not only by President Snow, but by his so called friends. "Now you know." Peeta

tried to soften his words when he spoke to Portia. "Why don't we go to my room and you can...fit me for my interview tomorrow." It was important they kept up appearances.

Portia nodded and followed him down to his room. She scanned his body with the electrical device she had used at the hospital and said, "Okay. Looks like everything should fit properly." Peeta stood with his back to her. He had trusted this woman and now she was helping to tear his life apart. "Peeta?" Portia's hand rested on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she whispered to him before she left.

Peeta squeezed his eyes closed and hung his head. It wasn't Portia's fault yet he was taking it out on her. He was ashamed of himself for acting the way he did. He needed to apologize. To tell her he was sorry too and he didn't blame her. She had done so much for he and Katniss. Peeta wanted her to know he was grateful. He pulled on his bedroom door. Turned the knob over and over again, but the door wouldn't budge. He knew Haymitch hadn't locked him in. No, this wasn't anyone from his team. This was a direct message from the Capitol. Peeta let go of the doorknob as though it were burning his hand and walked backwards away from it. Their punishment had already begun.

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"What do you think she'll be wearing?" Prim's face was bright with excitement.

"I don't know, Prim." Her mother answered her.

"I thought the dress they had her in last night was the best one yet!" Prim smiled up at Gale. "Didn't you?"

"I was kind of partial to her being set on fire," Gale rubbed the back of his head as he answered Prim...honestly.

"Oh, Katniss is always on fire." Prim flapped her hand at him. "Last night she was just showing us a different type of fire. She was...radiant." She did look pretty last night, but Gale still preferred her when everyone saw who she really was. The girl on fire, like she was in the Tribute Parade.

After watching the recap of the Games last night, Gale attempted to keep his emotions in check. Had Katniss and Peeta hurled themselves against one another their greeting would've been easier to take, but the way they stared... Gale tried to forget about it. He tried to forget the way they sat together on the little sofa the Capitol provided for them. The way they held onto each other while watching the recap. Everyone could see that they were relying on each other to get them through it. Prim had put her hands over her eyes during the mutt portion of the recap. Afterwards she said, "There was no reason for those Gamemakers to make such monsters out of the people that love them." But Gale knew there was. The Capitol always had reasons for their actions. The main one being intimidation.

"Welcome. Welcome." Caesar Flickerman sat across from Katniss and Peeta who were once again huddled together on a little sofa.

"Caesar," Peeta smiled at the host.

"Hello," Katniss seemed to be nervous.

"I can't tell you how thrilled I am to be sitting with the two of you again. Peeta?" Caesar turned his attention to him. "Looks like the dream you shared with the nation has come true."

"Not exactly," Peeta grinned and gave Katniss a squeeze. "She's supposed to be running into my arms when I get home." Caesar and Peeta laughed. "Guess I'll just have to be satisfied with her riding back home on the train in my arms instead." Katniss flashed Peeta a smile and Caesar let out an, "Aww." Gale rolled his eyes and thought, I'm going to puke.

"And Katniss how do you feel about that?" Caesar asked her.

"I think that can be arranged," she placed one of her hands against Peeta's chest. Why do you keep doing that, Catnip? Gale asked himself. It's not like he's ripping with muscles anymore. I've seen him with his shirt off since entering the Games. He's not that impressive.

"Peeta? I'm going to just go ahead and ask whose idea was it for the alliance between you and the tributes from Districts 1 and 2?"

"Mine and my mentor's. I had to keep Katniss safe from them and the only way I could do that was by joining up with them. As someone once said, 'if you can't beat 'em. Join 'em.'" Yeah, that was me dough boy, Gale thought to himself. Maybe I'll tell Catnip that when she gets back and she'll see just how much I wanted to keep her safe in the arena too?

"It was brilliant!" Caesar lifted his hand to his chest and said, "Sheer genius! What amazed me was how effortlessly you fit in with them. We had no clue you were such a proficient actor."

"The secret to being a good actor is having great motivation." Peeta lifted Katniss' hand to his lips and kissed it. "I had the best."

"You won't get any arguments from me," Caesar agreed. "So, Katniss had no clue as to what you and your mentor had planned?"

"Not at first. How could I explain it to her while we were in training?" Peeta shrugged. "At the time I thought she barely knew I existed. If I had told her what the plan was...she probably wouldn't have gone along with it."

"You're right about that," Katniss said as if scolding Peeta.

"See what I mean? We won the Games and she's still giving me a hard time about it." Peeta and Caesar chuckled.

"You did something in the arena, Peeta...something we've never seen before." Caesar had a thoughtful look on his face. "You willingly put yourself in danger for a fellow tribute. That in itself is truly heroic." What about Katniss' heroism, Gale thought. She put herself in more danger than Peeta did.

"Katniss, you did the same for Peeta. Tell me...when you entered these Games you were trying to win for your sister and then it all changed. Why do you think that is?" Stupid question, Caesar. Gale really wanted to punch the man in the face. I'm pretty sure she answered that one when they were holed up in their little love shack.

"I already told this to Peeta...well, you know that Caesar. You saw it in the recap last night." Katniss held onto Peeta's hand. "I'm not complete without him."

"Oh, how darling," Caesar made a face as though he were enamored with the pair, directly into the camera. "Well, Peeta, we know from our days in the cave, that it was love at first sight for you from what, age five?"

"From the moment I laid eyes on her," As if to prove it, Peeta laid his eyes on Katniss.

"But, Katniss, what a ride for you. I think the real excitement for the audience was watching you fall for him." Oh, yeah. That was a big thrill for me, Gale thought. "When did you realize you were in love with him?"

Katniss looked down at Peeta's hand and stared at it. "The moment I lifted up that snare with my rabbit in it, I...I realized how much he was willing to sacrifice for me, but love? I guess when Rue asked me about it. Prior to that, I tried not to think about it too much. It was too painful. Then Rue asked me if everything was true about us," Katniss turned to Peeta. "And I found myself asking the same question. It was then that I knew...that I let myself accept it." Gale closed his eyes as her words sunk in.

"And the rule change...how did you feel when you heard that, Katniss?"

"I think the whole nation knew how I felt," Katniss blushed. Catnip doesn't blush, Gale told himself. Then what is she doing now? "I was just thrilled that for the first time...there was a chance...I could keep him."

Caesar started wiping his eyes with his handkerchief and Gale wanted to shove the thing down the host's throat.

"So," Peeta put his head against Katniss'. "Now that you have me, what are you going to do with me?"

"Put you somewhere you can't get hurt." Katniss lifted her hand and cupped Peeta's cheek. When they kissed Gale could almost feel the bile rising to his throat. Then you'll want to keep him away from me, Catnip, he thought.

Caesar continued with the interview showing their injuries and all the ways they got hurt in the arena. Gale let his mind wander. Catnip, I thought I was okay with this. After hearing about the things that Peeta did for you...the way his mother treated him... I thought I could handle this whole thing, but I can't. I still want you in my life. You have to know that I'll do anything for you. I'm willing to fight for you...for us.

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Katniss had been tired of waiting for Peeta to show up. She showered and went to the roof, but he wasn't there. She went back to her room, continued to wait and finally gave up. She didn't care if Portia had him standing buck naked in the middle of his room, she was going in there, but she couldn't. Her door was locked. She had been trapped inside of her bedroom. It couldn't have been Haymitch, he was gone. Everyone was gone. Then who, she wondered? And was Peeta trapped too? Is that why he hadn't come to her? The Capitol. They were keeping them imprisoned intentionally. Effie's warning to her was no joke. She and Peeta were in a world of danger.

When her prep team entered the next morning to prepare her for the interview that afternoon, she raced out of the room to "get some breakfast," she had said, but Peeta wasn't there. She walked to his room and knocked, but there was no answer. She tried his knob, but the door was locked. Peeta was still a prisoner in his quarters. The bowl of grain she had tried to eat sat like a rock in her gut. She went back to her room and let the prep team make her over.

Peeta could barely sleep that night. He tossed and turned trying to figure out what he was going to tell Katniss. His plan was to take her up to the roof, a very popular spot as of late, and try to explain with as little detail as possible why he had to do what he was planning on

doing, but the Capitol made that impossible for him. When he finally did fall asleep he was plagued with nightmares. He was looking down into the eyes at the female tribute from District 8. He closed his eyes and slashed her throat, but when he looked down, it wasn't the girl from Eight that he had killed. It was Katniss. Peeta woke up in a cold sweat, shaking as though his fever had returned. In the morning he took a shower and studied the buttons carefully. He didn't want to smell like a bunch of flowers. When he took notice of one of the settings, he smiled to himself and pushed the button. He stood in the shower for over an hour waiting for someone to break him out of his room. His prep team was due to come soon, he was sure, but no one showed up for almost two hours. Now he was standing in the hallway of the penthouse they were staying in and waiting.

"Hey," he heard Katniss' voice and headed for her.

"Hey," he took her hands in his. "Sorry I didn't make it to your room."

"That's okay," Katniss squeezed his hand tightly and said, "I understand. Do you have a feeling Haymitch is trying to keep us apart," she whispered to him, knowing full well that Haymitch hadn't been the cause of their overnight stay in 'prison.'

Oh, Katniss, he thought, if only you knew. "Well, as soon as we're done here then we get to go home."

"Then no one can keep us apart," Katniss smiled at him.

It took every ounce of restraint for Peeta not to pull her into his arms and cry. Instead he pulled her against him and kissed her.

"Mmmm," Katniss smiled. "You smell good."

"Oh, yeah." He had hoped she would like it.

"Cinnamon... The only thing missing is the dill, but I think I can live without that." She nuzzled her head underneath his chin.

Their interview was tedious, but necessary. Peeta was cool and charming, making sure that no one questioned his love for Katniss. His heart broke when she found out about his leg; he had meant to tell her about that on the roof too. He couldn't take the guilt he was feeling. "Hey," he lifted her face away from his shoulder. "It's better than the alternative, right?"

"Right," she said softly.

"Now Katniss," Caesar interrupted them. "I know you've had a shock, but I've got to ask. The moment when you pulled out those berries. What was going on in your mind...hmmm?"

Play it up, Katniss, Peeta thought to himself as she waited to answer.

"I couldn't stand the thought of living without him. What would be the point?" She turned and looked at Peeta. "I can't survive without him."

But you have to, Peeta thought, and you will.

"Peeta? Anything to add?" Caesar asked.

He wanted to pour his heart out to her. To tell her how much he loved her and how incredible she was. How he had no life until she came into it. Instead he replied, "No. I think that goes for both of us."

Effie had escorted them onto the train after their short farewells to Portia and Cinna. Peeta had taken the opportunity to tell his stylist he was sorry for being short with her and how much he was going to miss her. Portia had hugged him and called him a, "dear boy," then kissed his cheek.

They went through the motions. Dinner. A recap of the interview, changing out of their clothes and into something more appropriate for their ride back to District 12.

When the train stopped for fuel, that night, Peeta took Katniss by the hand. It was now or never. "Let's take a walk."

"Are we allowed to?" Katniss smirked.

"Yeah," Peeta gave her a halfhearted smile. He led her past the train and down the tracks until he was sure that no one could hear them.

"Katniss, I love you," he kept his voice down.

"I love you too," her tone matched his.

When he kissed her, he tried to memorize everything about her. The feel of her lips against his. The way her breath would catch in her throat. Her tiny whimpers when she let herself go.

He pressed his forehead against hers and said, "I have to tell you something impor..."

"Great job, you two." Haymitch spoke quietly even though the only thing surrounding them was some scraggly bushes. "This separation is only temporary while we're in the district. Once the Victory Tour comes...you can go back to normal."

Katniss stood frozen in place. Her mouth was opening and closing like a fish out of water as Haymitch made his way back to the train.

"What...What's he talking about?"

"That's what I was trying to tell you. I wanted to tell you last night, but I was locked in my room until my prep team showed up." Katniss felt

her heart drop to her stomach. "The berries, Katniss. The Capitol didn't like it one bit."

She knew that already. Hadn't Effie told her just as much? "I know."

"Then you know they think we're too...rebellious." Peeta took her limp hands in his and gave them a little shake. "They think we planned it to make them look stupid."

"We didn't plan anything? We thought we were going to win."

"I know, but that's not how they're looking at it."

"They're mad. I know that, but if we show them that we did it because we love each other...because...because..."

"Oh, Katniss." Peeta pulled her into his arms. "We both know why we did it, but they don't care. They think we're a threat to them. That we might start trouble in the district if we stay together."

"Is that why they locked us in our rooms?" Katniss lifted the arms that were hanging at her sides and gripped his back.

"Probably...yes. I'm sure it is." Peeta was almost thankful now that the Capitol had done that. "They're sending us a message. Stay apart or else."

"No." Katniss pulled away from him. "No. I won't let them continue to run my...*our* lives."

"We've got no choice." Peeta stepped closer to her. "If we don't do as they want...they could hurt the people we love."

"But Peeta..." Katniss' heart was racing. Her mouth was dry. "I can't. I just can't." Her eyelids were blinking rapidly.

"Yes you can, Katniss. You can do this. We have to do this."

"No. I won't let them take you away from me." She threw her arms around his neck and choked into his ear, "I won't leave you."

"Even if staying with me means endangering Prim? Because that's what we're doing if we don't take the Capitol's warning to heart. We're putting everyone we know...everyone we love in danger."

"We can protect them." Katniss was crying into his neck. "We can keep them safe."

Peeta's fingers dug into her scalp. "Someone once told me I couldn't protect everyone."

"Don't!" She lashed out at him through her tears. "Don't throw my words back at me."

"That's not what I was trying to do." He knew they'd argue over this decision. He hated it when he was right about these things. "But it's just you and me against the Capitol. How good do you think our odds are?"

"I'm going to be sick," Katniss pulled away from him and walked further down the track.

Peeta followed her and put his arms around her from behind. "Please, Katniss? This isn't just you and me we're talking about anymore."

She pulled his arms off of her and turned to him. "I never asked for this. For any of it."

"Neither did I."

"Yes you did. You wanted this from the very beginning." Katniss licked her lips with her dry, scratchy tongue.

"What are you talking about? You think I wanted the Capitol to..."

"I'm not talking about the Capitol. I'm talking about this...us. I told you that very first day I didn't want a relationship with anyone. I told you loving someone would only cause trouble and now look what it's done."

"No, Katniss. No," Peeta tried to take her hands in his, but she pulled them out of his grasp. "Love doesn't have to be that way. Love is what makes life worth living." He waited for her to say something but she didn't. She just kept chewing at her bottom lip. They stood in silence until Peeta asked, "Do you regret it, Katniss? Do you regret...being with me?" He paused. "Loving me?"

"You hooooo," Effie's voice rang out to them. She was waiving them back to the train.

They didn't move. They just stood there looking at one another.

"This is it, Katniss. This is all the time we have left together. This train ride and the dinner back in Twelve."

The sound of Effie's heels clicking on the train platform was closing in on them. "We've got a schedule to keep, you two."

"We'll be right there, Effie," Peeta called to her over his shoulder.

"Answer me, Katniss. Do you regret loving me?"

"We better go," Katniss walked up to Effie and mumbled, "Sorry."

"No need for apologies. We just don't want to dilly dally."

Peeta went to bed that night without seeing Katniss. She had entered the train and locked herself in her room claiming she was tired. He roamed around the train into the wee hours of the morning, staying close to Katniss' room in case she appeared. When he could no longer keep his eyes opened he went to bed thinking, she hates me now. I did exactly what I told her I wouldn't do and now she hates me. How are you going to keep her safe if she won't talk to you? How will you keep her safe? You can't, Peeta. That's not your job anymore. That honor belongs to someone else now; he blew out an exasperated sigh with this last thought.

He brushed his teeth and choked when he tasted the flavor of cinnamon filling his mouth. She had to see him; they still had a role to play. He threw his clothes on and searched the train for her. "Effie? Have you seen Katniss?"

"She hasn't left her room since last night," Effie had a look of remorse on her face. Peeta wondered if she knew. Had Effie been aware of what was going on? He knocked on her door and waited for her to answer.

"Go away, Haymitch! I don't want to talk to you!" Peeta couldn't help the smile that blossomed across his face.

"It's not Haymitch."

"Oh..." there was a moment's hesitation then she said, "I don't want to talk to you either," but her voice wasn't as cold as it had been when she thought he was Haymitch. It was filled with heartache and sorrow.

"Please open the door, Katniss?" He rested his palms against the wooden surface. "Please?" His head joined his hands.

"Go away, Peeta." He could hear the hitch in her voice.

"I'm not going anywhere." His head flew off the door when she swung it open.

"Funny," she was angry again. Peeta preferred this to sad. "That's not what you said last night."

"We need to talk, Katniss."

"You said everything you had to say and so did I."

"I didn't say nearly as much as I wanted to." He leaned his back against her door so she couldn't slam it in his face. "Why don't we go to outside and talk? We can stand at the end of the train. It's kind of noisy, but..." Peeta left the suggestion hanging in the air.

She was tempted to punch him in the stomach like she did Haymitch the night before. He had followed her into her room and asked if she was all right. Katniss turned on him and started screaming at him. He hauled her by the hand to the outside of the train, into the night air.

"If you want to talk to me, do it out here. I'd rather not get killed because you want to have a hissy fit," Haymitch said to her.

"No, you'd rather I give up my entire life to appease the Capitol and their goons," She spat at him.

"This wasn't my idea," Haymitch defended himself.

"So it was Peeta's?" Katniss found it hard to believe that Peeta would suggest such a thing.

"No. It was the Capitol's." Haymitch informed her.

"The Capitol," Katniss said with disgust.

"Just what did you think would happen when you practically threw their own Games in their faces?" Haymitch threw his hands up in the air and asked, "Did you think you two could just ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after?"

"This is bunch of crap, Haymitch. Those people cannot tell me how to live my life."

"Oh really?" Haymitch folded his arms and said, "When did you get appointed President of Panem? They tell all of us how to live our lives. It's how they work."

Katniss knew he was only being honest. Isn't that why she hated the Capitol so much? Because they were the end all, be all of everything in *everyone's* lives. "What good will this do? Keeping me and him apart? Aren't they worried they'll look like morons if we act like we were lying to them about our relationship?"

"They want to hurt you, Katniss. They want to hurt, Peeta. And this is the worst thing they can do to you right now. They could kill your family..." Haymitch shrugged. "...but you said it yourself. You aren't living your life for them anymore. You're living life to love that boy."

"And that's how they've chosen to hurt me? By taking away Peeta?" The reality of the situation was finally sinking in.

"That about sums it up."

"Why do I have to let them? We beat them in the arena. We can beat them..."

"Where are you going to hide at home, Katniss? There's no arena to hide in back at Twelve. No trees to tie yourself to. No cave you can

take shelter in. They're everywhere." He gripped her by the arms and gave her a shake. "They're even in your home."

"My home?" Katniss had always felt like their home was safe, but she wasn't moving back into her old house. She was moving into Victor's Village. "What about your home, Haymitch? Are they there too?"

"Yeah, sweetheart. They are," He resigned.

"You knew all of this..." Katniss stepped backwards, away from him. "You knew this and you didn't bother to tell me?"

"Why would I tell you? So you could enter the Games with even more of a chip on your shoulder?"

"And Peeta? Did he know?" If he had, Katniss was sure he would've told her.

"No...the kid didn't know a thing about it until I told him before the crowning."

"So they win regardless of whether or not we leave the arena? Only now it's worse. They'd rather us stay alive and live miserably without one another than die in peace." Katniss paused and said, "Being a victor means a lifetime of servitude not living in the lap of luxury."

"Now you're thinking like the Capitol officials."

Katniss didn't know why that pissed her off, but it did and before she knew it her fist was flying into Haymitch's stomach. "You son of a bitch. Why couldn't you just let us die out there? We would've been fine with that." She stormed into her room and locked the door behind her.

Peeta stood in her doorway, begging her to talk to him. "Please come outside with me?"

Over the course of the night she had gone from downright pissed off to weeping like a baby over Peeta and Haymitch's words. She didn't want to do it. Several times she thought maybe she and Peeta could just hide it, like they did before. They could arrange to secretly meet, but she pushed the thought out of her mind when she realized Haymitch had been right. There was no place to hide in District 12. "What's left to say?" She asked Peeta.

"There's a lot to say, but we only have a little while to say it." He held his hand out to her. "We need to work this out." He breathed a sigh of relief when she placed her hand in his and let him lead her outside.

"Haymitch said I pretty much brought this on myself."

"He what?!" Peeta was going to kill the man. "You did not. Neither one of us did."

"Didn't we?" Katniss stood at the edge of the train listening to the sound of the engines rumbling and the metal wheels on the tracks.

"No we didn't," Peeta walked up behind her and took a breath before placing his hands on her waist. "This isn't our fault. We didn't volunteer for the Games."

"I did." Katniss felt the heat of his fingers seeping through her shirt.

"You know what I mean, Katniss. Neither one of us wanted to be a part of it." He stepped closer to her.

She wanted to lean back against his chest. To feel the comfort of his arms around her. It was safe there. "No, we didn't."

"The thing is...we're still playing, Katniss. We'll always be playing."

"I'm tired of it. So tired of playing the Games." She gave in and relaxed her back against his chest.

His arms immediately wrapped around her torso. His lips were at her ear. "It's only for a little while. We still have to keep up appearances in the other districts...at the Capitol..."

"For the viewing audience." Katniss' was more than tired. She was beat...broken at the thought of Peeta not being a part of her life.

"Unfortunately, yes. But once the tour is over and we come home...we can live the way we want to, Katniss. They can't stop us then."

"You think they'll have...what...magically forgiven us by then? That they'll allow us to go on the tour and say, 'oh...well, they did the tour for us, so I guess we can let them live. Let their family live.'" Katniss felt the tears that had plagued her the night before coming back.

"No...I guess not." His longing for her was overwhelming. She wasn't even gone yet and he missed her. He turned her around in one swift motion and kissed her hard on the lips. She didn't respond to him. She just let herself be kissed. When Peeta pulled away from her he said, "You do regret loving me, don't you?"

She wanted to tell him, no, but she was numb. Peeta was leaving her, not because he wanted to, but because of the things she had done in the arena. She lifted those berries to her lips thinking she couldn't live without him *and* because she refused to let the Gamemakers win. Yes, it was her fault all of this was happening. How could she claim to love Peeta if she wasn't willing to protect him when it really mattered? She was being selfish by thinking she and Peeta could continue on and not pay a price. She had to let him go no matter how much it hurt.

By the time Katniss pulled herself from her thoughts, the door to the train was sliding closed and Peeta was gone.

The next time Katniss saw him was as the train was pulling into the station at District 12. He was standing across the compartment looking at her.

I'm sorry, Peeta, she thought to herself. I should've never agreed to meet you under that damn tree. I should've never put you in so much danger, but I can keep you safe now. I'll do what the Capitol wants. I'll try and forget that I love you. Try to forget that you love me. They won't leave us alone after the Victory Tour. They'll never leave us alone so, I'll go back to the person I was before I ever let you into my life...my heart.

Peeta walked up to her and held out his hand. "One more time? For the audience?"

They stepped onto the train platform holding onto each other's hands. Their smiles hid the inner turmoil going on within them.

Peeta could swear the entire district had shown up for their arrival. His eyes scanned the crowd as he and Katniss held their hands above their heads in triumph. Peeta looked at Katniss' face and noticed that the artificial smile she was displaying for the audience, when they had first walked out, was now genuine. He followed her eyes and saw where they were focused. Gale. He had a huge smile on his face and Prim on his shoulders. Gale mouthed the word, 'hi' to Katniss. Peeta looked at Katniss to see how she would respond. Her lips moved, but no sound came out, 'hi.'